

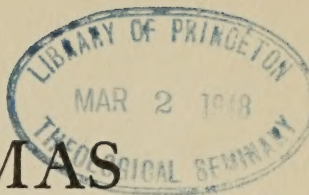
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North, Frederick J.,
Advent and Christmas sermons
by representative preachers



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**ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS
SERMONS**

ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS SERMONS



BY
REPRESENTATIVE PREACHERS

EDITED BY
FREDERICK J. NORTH

EDITOR OF "HARVEST THANKSGIVING SERMONS," "COMMUNION
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NEW  YORK
GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS SERMON

U-C

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Preface

THE Publishers put forth this volume of *Advent and Christmas Sermons* in the hope that it may prove as useful as the previous volumes—*Harvest Thanksgiving Sermons* and *Communion Addresses* and that it may receive an equally gratifying reception.

They have had several letters saying that the volumes already issued have been a source of inspiration, and expressing the hope that other volumes of sermons on the different Church Festivals might follow. The contributors represent all shades of religious opinion. In every case the familiar themes on which their discourses are based, have been treated with a clearness that must make the volume helpful to all who desire to keep abreast of modern thought on subjects of such supreme interest and importance to the Christian as the Advent and Birth of Our Lord.

August, 1925.

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THE DIVINE IN THE HUMAN

By ARCH. ALEXANDER, B.D.

St. John's Wood.

PART I
ADVENT SERMONS

“ Nevertheless God, that comforteth those that are cast down, comforted us by the coming of Titus.”

—2 Cor. vii. 6.

The Divine in the Human

WHEN we read these words with an open mind, trying to discount the familiarity that so blunts wonder, it is the great daring of them that impresses us. It is a tremendous thing that Paul is saying here, and as we stand beside him on his peak, like Cortes' men, we may see whole new continents of truth swim into our ken. Notice what he declares—he begins with God, the infinite and eternal Being, Creator and Sustainer of a Universe which grows ever more vast and wonderful as Science spells out something more of its meaning—God the Father of all spirits. Pause for a moment and try to realize, however faintly, what we really mean when we say "God." Let the mystery and infiniteness and awe of the very idea of God take hold of you. Almighty God! Who can comprehend the breadth and length and depth and height of what that must mean?

He is a God of comfort, says Paul. Well, you can predicate anything of such a Being. He is a God of comfort, says Paul, and *He sent His comfort to me*. And that is a different story!

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“ Hold ! ” we are just going to cry, “ what right have you to presume ? ”—when Paul proceeds : He sent His comfort to me, He relieved my anxiety, He answered my prayers, by the coming of Titus,—just a dear, personal friend of Paul’s own ! Paul begins with the infinite God, and ends with his friend Titus. God and Titus ! What have these two to do with each other ?

Because it is in the Bible, we don’t realize the daring, the fearless leap of faith that brings the Eternal down from the infinite heavens into such a thing as the timely advent of a friend. To get the shock of it, we need to say, as Francis Thompson did,—“ Heaven and Charing Cross.”

It is the glory of the Hebrew genius that it makes bold to scale the heavens and bring God into man’s little life. The Lord—what shall other nations say of Him ? That He is great and high and holy, that He is remote and unknowable and unthinkable. But this is what the Hebrew says, and has taught the world to say after him : “ The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.”

God revealing His comfort through Titus. Titus, that dear fellow, but quite ordinary man, being but the vesture concealing the infinite purpose and loving kindness of God ! Either way, it is a revelation—to go up or to go down is a new vision of truth.

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We seek for God, and cry "Oh, that I knew where I might find Him!" And, behold! He is beside us—in Titus. We look at our Titus, and think of all that we owe to his friendship and trust and charity, and he vanishes, and we are gazing upwards and saying: "We thank Thee, O God."

No man hath seen God at any time. The very idea of what God is, is too high for us; we cannot attain unto it. Yet we have in us a divine hunger to find Him; we are restless till we rest in Him. But there are scores and scores, in this age of ours, searching, listening within for some magical unearthly voice, peering all up and down life for a glimpse of some naked, patently supernatural fact, and, confessing sadly that there is no sign of Him to be found. They see Nature and Beauty and Truth; they see life and men, women, and children; they see their love and loyalty and sacrifice, their sympathy, patience and toil; but the naked, self-evidencing fact of God they never see.

And to these, Paul's truth comes like a new Gospel. You are looking too high, it says to them. Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into Heaven? Look down, look around you! There is Titus, your friend, at your side: Titus to whom you owe so much. See in him God's comfort to you. Look for the divine in the human. Realize that your most spiritual treasure

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is contained in an earthen vessel. We could not look upon the bare fact of God and live—but He comforts us by the coming of Titus.

If only we saw all our ordinary life with Paul's eye, every common bush would be afire with God. For if He were in such a prosaic happening as the arrival of Titus, what is there in our lives that is too insignificant, too purely human and ordinary to have concealed in it God's purpose of love and blessing for us? If God was in the coming of Titus—then we are just wrapped round with His purpose; and He touches and calls and comforts and heals and helps us every day.

As you ponder it, this truth opens out illimitably in all directions. For instance, it gives us a larger doctrine of Providence.

There are some who look back on their lives and say there is no Providence visible. No angel with drawn sword, perhaps, no writing in the sky. But that is not how God's Providence reaches us. It comes by Titus, our friend. It is by human voices that we know and love, by books that we read, that God speaks to us. It is by the material disabilities and limitations we complain of that He guides our feet. When the Lord speaks His word of hope or comfort to us, unless we have learned Paul's wisdom, we may, like Mary, "suppose Him to be the gardener."

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When you think back on what moved you to some fateful decision, you may be able to account, as you imagine, for every link in the chain. It is all natural, ordinary, human. And yet God can be in it, is in it for certain, or there is no Providence at all. A mishap at a pauper's funeral, and the unfeeling laughter of some officials, set young Astley Cooper thinking many years ago. There is nothing obviously of God about that. Yet that was what turned him into the Lord Shaftesbury of later days, with a heart aflame to right social wrongs. Ordinary? Yes. Human? Yes. Just Titus; and yet God, too, behind Titus.

One of the greatest of the Hebrew prophets said of God : "Verily Thou art a God that hidest Thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour." And we all assent. Clouds and darkness are about Him. We do not see Him, we never see Him, we only see Titus. But this Scripture is written for us that we may learn to believe that behind our friend or our unexpected gift or our closed door, there is the Providence of the Father in Heaven.

Back of the loaf is the snowy flour,
Back of the flour, the mill ;
Back of the mill is the wheat and the shower,
And the sun *and the Father's Will.*

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We find in our text, too, a larger doctrine of Inspiration. Those who are living the Godward life, in the faith of Jesus, hope and pray, and now and then may even see, that they are learning, growing in grace, increasing in the knowledge of God. It may be very slow, so slow that only by measuring by years can it be detected. But it is real. They are being nurtured, taught, illumined by what they call their "means of grace." But what are these? Books, Nature, Poetry, Art, Music; their children, their homes, sicknesses and daily work. And the big common ones: Prayer, Worship and the Bible. But God is not visible anywhere there. He hides Himself behind our means of grace. Even in the Sacraments of the Church or of common life He is hidden and His glory veiled; so that we need the eye of faith to be able to see that it was God who comforted and helped and taught us by the reading of some book, or a quiet talk with a friend.

With this thought to guide us, we can lay full and frank emphasis on the humanness of these books that make up our Bible. They were written as other books are written, they have a definite historical place and purpose, and they have suffered the vicissitudes of other books. We can lay that emphasis without apology, and

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yet, guided by Paul's thought, we can understand how they have been used by God, and how He is behind them, and has a purpose in them, and speaks through them. And when some word there finds me, and my heart burns within me, I am not content to express my debt to Isaiah or St. Paul. For it pleased God to give me for my comfort or enlightening this word of Isaiah or Paul—it pleased *God*, and my thanks are due to Him.

But, best of all, this line of thought opens out for us a worthy and welcome doctrine of the Incarnation. The place of Jesus in our thought is witnessed to by the mere fact that we are met here to worship the Infinite and eternal God in the light and truth of Jesus, and in His Name. It is in the face of Jesus that we have seen the glory of God. All that we know of God, all that is precious and personal; all that draws us to Him and moves us to trust ourselves to Him, body, soul and spirit, for this life and the next; all that we know of His forgiveness, patience and love—all that, we have got from Christ and through Him. There is no other name to be named beside His. There is no title or honour, too august or divine, to express our sense of what Jesus is as Redeemer and Lord, the Bearer of the Good News, Himself the Gospel to men.

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But, when we sit down to read the story of His life on earth, how He grew in wisdom and stature, and was made perfect through suffering; how He was tempted in all respects like as we are, yet without sin; when we watch Him as He walks through these pages of the Gospel from the Carpenter's bench to the Cross, it is the true and perfect humanity of our Lord which draws us to Him. If we could have seen Him, there was no nimbus above His head, no cohort of angels to guard Him as Heaven's beloved Son. He lived a Man among men, that Simon the Pharisee could insult, and Roman soldiers could mock and scourge and crucify. A Man. The Son of Man. Behold the Man!

Yet—and the word again is Paul's—God was in Him reconciling the world unto Himself. Here is the best and greatest of all the treasures of God bestowed on men, and it, too, is in an earthen vessel. Even in Jesus we do not see the naked supernatural, the unveiled Divine. The glory of God is hidden in the life and character, in the love and sacrifice of a sinless Son of Man.

We have no category of reality higher than manhood. With these present faculties of ours, we can reach no higher in actual knowledge. We are aware of God. We live our lives in Him, but we cannot conceive Him. We speak of

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angelic beings, but we cannot imagine what they are like; and when we paint them, we make them men and women with wings, because manhood is our highest category of reality in the realm of actual knowledge.

Therefore, and on that word the whole message of Advent seems to turn, therefore, the very Love of God Himself came among us as a Man; therefore, God is seeking and calling and judging us in the Man, Christ Jesus; therefore, the infinite and eternal Father, that He may win the love and trust of His heedless, wilful children, goes all the length that even Love can go, and gives Himself to them in the Man, Jesus Christ, of Nazareth and Calvary. It is of one texture, woven throughout. It is God's way in every sphere, right up to the highest. He is a God who hides Himself. He sent Paul His comfort by the coming of Titus. That, on the plane of daily Providence; and on the topmost peak and summit of His grace, this—that the Father sends you and me and all men His salvation, His Love, His very Self in Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Man, for Whose coming among us as a little helpless Child, the Church is keeping again, in memory, her Advent-watch.

THE SHEPHERDS IN THE FIELDS

BY WALTER H. ARMSTRONG

London Wesleyan Mission.

“ There were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night,” etc.—Luke ii. 8-20.



The Shepherds in the Fields

It is a fact of great significance that the intimations concerning the advent of Jesus were given both to wise men from the East, and to shepherds in the fields. For Christianity is not a class-religion, like some of the esoteric religions of old, or like some of the fanciful cults of to-day. The Gospel of Jesus, though coming from the Orient, has no sympathy with the caste system so characteristic of the East, and is entirely opposed to the class-warfare so loudly proclaimed by some in the West. The Magi were the scientists of their day, whilst the shepherds were amongst the poorest, and possibly the most despised of the people. The fact, therefore, that intimations of the advent of Jesus were given to both the cultured and the ignorant, the rich and the poor, conveys, even at the very outset, an underlying suggestion of the Catholicity of the Christian Gospel, and the relationship of the Holy Child to the human race in all its varying conditions. To those capable of bringing costly offerings of gold, frankincense and myrrh, were the good tidings

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revealed ; whilst those who could bring nothing but the adorations of their hearts received the gracious revelation also. Most fitting was this introduction for a Gospel which was to be for all people.

It is also very significant that the intimations of the birth of Jesus were so different in the ways they were communicated, the Magi being guided to the manger by a star, whilst the shepherds had direct information from an angelic voice. Herein is suggested the remarkable adaptation of Christianity to all people. There is always more than one way of proclaiming Jesus to the world. There are many roads to Him. The Gospel ever comes to us with revelations fitted to our growth and shape of mind, and with adaptations to the ever-varying conditions and needs of life and thought. No single stereotyped method of announcing Jesus was employed at His Incarnation, and none should be insisted on in proclaiming Him to-day

Christ was born in Bethlehem. And at the same time "There were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night." They were occupied with their ordinary tasks. There was nothing to suggest that this particular night was likely to be different from any other night. These

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humble shepherds had no expectations of the extraordinary, no visions of open heavens and angelic glory.

These shepherds on the lawn,
Or ere the point of dawn,
Sat simply chatting in a rustic row.
Full little thought they than
That the mighty Pan
Was kindly come to live with them below.
Perhaps their loves, or else their sheep,
Was all that did their silly thoughts
so busy keep.

Yet the extraordinary happened. In the midst of that quiet night came an angelic visitor announcing to them the greatest tidings ever heard by human ears: "Unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Saviour, Who is Christ the Lord." Then, a fitting climax to such an announcement, "there appeared a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, good will to men."

What have we in this age to say about these things which happened on that first Christmas morn? Doubtless there are those who smile with disdain, regarding the whole of that story as a product of disordered imagination; but this kind of imagination hears not such music

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as these shepherds heard, nor does it produce such lasting effects on life. There are more things in heaven, and on earth, than any known laws of nature can adequately explain. The progress of scientific knowledge does not destroy wonder. It simply reveals a bigger and a more remarkable world, where marvels and mysteries abound. But underlying all the various methods employed there is this great fact: It is the communication of the knowledge of the Divine by revelation. While shepherds were in the fields an angel appeared unto them. This is one of many indications that the highest truths are not discovered, but are revealed. In the realm of the Spirit we owe far more to revelation than to investigation. "Can'st thou by searching find out God?" Certainly we cannot discover much concerning Him. It has been said that history is the record of man's search after God, but it is surely far more the record of God's labour to make Himself known to men. This has been done by way of revelation: "The word of the Lord came unto me." "And it came to pass that in the breaking of bread He made Himself known unto them." These new thoughts of God, of life, of duty, of heaven—how frequently they come to us through angelic voices, through inspirations of the Eternal Spirit. The heavens

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are opened to us by a divine hand, and we are given a vision of Eternal Glories. How great a part revelation has played in enlarging our ideas of God and of the soul, none can tell; but the occasional opening of the heavens such as these shepherds witnessed has brought much glory to the earth. Nor ought there to be any suggestion that revelation and reason are opposing forces. It is possible to believe in both and recognize the services of both. Reason gropes its way from below upward towards the light; revelation withdraws the curtain from above, and bids us look on the things which eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive, but which God reveals by His Spirit. When we think of the effect of revelation on the lives of such men as Moses, Isaiah, Paul and Peter, we are constrained to believe, as Dinah Morris, in *Adam Bede*, says, "That our greatest thoughts and noblest impulses are given to us."

Are angelic voices never heard by us to-day? Do our ears never listen to the music of the heavenly hosts? That invisible choir, whose music is the gladness of the world: does it render its anthems to a heedless world? God is not dumb, that He should speak no more. Surely sometimes, like the shepherds in the fields, like the

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wise men studying the spacious firmament on high, or in some other way, the heavens are opened to us, and our souls are stirred within us as God reveals His presence. For the angels still sing, and we can, if only we will, hear the music of their songs. It is only the noise of confusion, the clash of tongues, the din of war, and the clamour of self which prevent our hearing the heavenly strains.

Oh, hush the noise, ye men of strife,

And hear the angels sing.

“Be still and know that I am God.”

But the songs are soon over. Revelations come and go. Like opportunities, they quickly pass. Thus was the experience of the shepherds. The angels withdrew from view. The glory departed as the heavens resumed their normal aspect. What then? “When the angels had gone away, the shepherds said, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.”

They went to verify the revelation. They set forth to see whether what the angel had declared to have happened was actual fact. They meant to see for themselves the Holy Child, Jesus. To them that first Christmas Day was to be not only a revelation of glad tidings from

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heaven, but a verification by themselves of the truth revealed. True they were only shepherds, but they were wise shepherds, and right early caught the spirit of Christianity. For the Gospel does not merely invite us to listen, it bids us verify its claims, to "prove all things, and hold fast that which is good."

The angels of God do not remain for ever. They come and go. It is for our benefit that they arrive, and for our benefit that they depart. The high seasons of the Spirit, the festivals of the soul are only occasional, never permanent. And well for us that this is so. A scientific writer, describing his mountaineering experiences, tells us that though the views from the heights are at first most glorious and highly enthralling to the emotions, yet a prolonged stay on the mountain top has a further curious effect. The mind becomes bewildered, the sensations confused, and all the natural powers seem to lose their normal functions. And the only way to restore the equilibrium of things, declares this writer, is to get back to the ordinary haunts of life again. That is equally true in the experiences of the spirit. The very revelations given for the soul's exaltation may easily become factors of spiritual paralysis. Conventions, for the deepening of the spiritual life will, if unduly

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prolonged, snare the soul into destruction. It is good to have retreats for the soul, but it is fatal to make habitations of such retreats. God invites us all to "Lift up our eyes on high," but when the star-gazing lasts too long, angelic messengers are sent, as they were to the Apostles, with the rebuke: "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven?" Every day is not a Christmas Day, and ought not to be. These shepherds of old set us all a fine example. When the angels had departed they went forth on their journey, staying not till they saw the Holy Child. Revelation always involves a commission. Every impression is to have an expression. When God gives a vision, the opportunity for making it actual is generally at our very door, as in the case of Peter on the housetop, when "While thinking on what the vision might mean, the Spirit said unto him, Behold three men seek thee." It is always when the angels have departed that the real test of faith comes. Many see the star, but never let it lead them to Bethlehem. Many hear angelic voices announcing glad tidings, but never verify in their own lives the revelation made. They hear of Jesus, but never seek Him. To their everlasting loss they do not trouble to make the journey in order to see this thing which has come to pass.

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“ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen as it was told unto them.” There is always the return to life’s ordinary duties and experiences. Rarely does the discovery of the Christ involve any sweeping change in the daily life and its tasks. What it does involve is a new spirit with a fresh outlook. These shepherds went back to their accustomed duties, they returned to the care of their sheep. But life for these shepherds could never be the same again. There was a fresh glory in it. They had passed through an experience which would forever have its influence upon them, an experience of which they could never be dispossessed. They had seen the Christ and oh, the difference to them for all time.

We, too, have to return to life’s duties, many of us to the trivial round and the common tasks. But festal days should have their influence on the other days of our pilgrimage. What of this great day of festivity—this Christmas Day?

“ We ring the bells, and we raise the strain,
We hang the garlands everywhere,
And bid the tapers twinkle fair;
And feast and frolic—and then we go
Back to the same old lives again.”

Is that to be true of us? Not if we have seen

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the Christ. And the real Christmas Day for any man is when Jesus is born in the heart. That day he can never forget. The great miracle of the Incarnation is repeated in his own life. The day passes, but not the experience. He becomes a new creation. Old things pass away, and all things become new.

“Heaven above is softer blue,
Earth beneath is sweeter green;
Something lives in every hue,
Christless eyes have never seen ;
Birds with sweeter songs o’erflow,
Flowers with richer beauties shine,
Since I know, as now I know,
I am His, and He is mine.”

The entrance of Jesus always enriches and enlarges life. It brings heaven and earth into contact, to the glorification of both. Sir Walter Scott was once asked, where is the finest scenery in Scotland, in the Highlands or in the Lowlands ? He replied that it was in neither, and declared that the finest Scottish scenery was where the Highlands and the Lowlands met. The finest life is that where the highlands of vision and inspiration glorify the needs and tasks of the lowlands of ordinary routine.

Our greatest need in this age is to visit Bethlehem and see the Christ for ourselves, to

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bow with adoring wonder to that Holy Child Who was sent for the rising and falling of many. Angel voices have brought us tidings of Him. Be it ours, like these shepherds of olden time, to verify the tidings and return to our vocations glorifying and praising God for the things we have heard and seen.

JESUS CHRIST THE FULFILMENT

BY M. E. AUBREY, M.A.
Secretary of the Baptist Union

“ Art thou he that should come ? ”—Matt. xi. 3.

“ All the promises of God in him are yea.”

—2 Cor. i. 20.

Jesus Christ the Fulfilment

I

THE attack on the Christian faith is renewed again and again. No sooner has it been arrested and hurled back in one quarter than it advances from another. We have no reason to complain of this. We should rather be glad that every serious question directed against what is essential in our belief is a challenge and an occasion to demonstrate how impregnably it is built upon the rock of experience and fact.

Last century it was physical science that brought its batteries to bear on us. The first fury of that assault is past, and it has almost spent its force. We no longer stagger before the onslaught.

In these days the questions that harass and search us most deeply grow out of the comparative study of religion. Men brought up in the traditional Christian beliefs are often perplexed. They have perhaps come across the translation of an ancient prayer to Osiris, in which he is given almost every descriptive title with which the early

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Christians honoured Our Lord. Osiris is the great redeemer in whose love, death and resurrection to glory standeth man's eternal hope. In his blood they are healed, justified and sanctified. So they read, and they find that the prayer was offered centuries before Christ came to earth. It is true that a sensitive Christian mind feels a difference in tone between such a prayer and the New Testament. It misses the deep penitential note of confession of sin and longing for forgiveness. But there is still enough resemblance left to bewilder. Are the articles of the Christian faith only the creation of devout imagination? Men tell us that they can believe in "God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth," but when they come to the Deity of Christ, the assertion that He was born of a virgin and that He rose from the dead, they find themselves faced with beliefs of a sort by no means confined to the Christian religion. Other heroes, mythical or historical, have had the same related of them. The question emerges—why should a man believe such assertions when they are made of Christ, and not believe them of the others? If he believes them all, what becomes of the uniqueness of Our Lord?

What are we to say to them?

We may remind them, for their encouragement,

Jesus Christ the Fulfilment

that the Christian walks by faith, not by creeds. A creed is at best only an attempt to crystallize the experience of men at some stage of Christian life. But Christian faith is the reaching forth of the whole personality of a man in surrender to the truth and call of God in Christ. Faith is the mighty thing by which we are justified. Creeds are secondary. We do not pretend to answer all the questions of men or to solve all their problems. "Great is the mystery of godliness." There will always remain for us an uncomprehended element in the plans and purposes of God, for His thoughts are higher than our thoughts and His ways than our ways. We do well to be on our guard against the man who always has an easy answer for every difficulty. We see only as in a glass darkly.

But we may not take refuge in a helpless obscurantism. The mystery is God's challenge to us. So we can do more than cheer the lonely seeker on his way. We can perhaps suggest directions in which he may look for help. At least we may remind him that that man is more pleasing to God who has a little of the truth and lives resolutely in the light of it than his neighbour who professes to believe all and is indifferent to it. God will not desert him. "He that willeth to do the will of God shall know of the teaching whether it be of God." Let a man follow the

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truth he sees and the Spirit of truth will guide him, and "knowledge grow from more to more."

We must also face the facts that the comparative study of religion has set before us. We have no right as Christian men to avoid them for the fear of disturbing the complacent belief of some. That is to minister to sheer mental and spiritual indolence. We are losing far too many intelligent men and women from the churches through our hesitation to meet their questions. Christian congregations would be the better for knowing what sort of problems are troubling their neighbours, and why. Men do not deny our traditional beliefs because they do not want to believe. Very often they would be only too glad to accept them if they could do so honestly. To those who find difficulty in declaring what the creeds assert, because they find parallels in other and pre-Christian religions, we surely have something to say.

Does it, after all, discredit our belief in Christ to find that some of its articles were anticipated in the minds of men before He came? Is it not written large everywhere in the New Testament that Jesus fulfilled the hope and anticipation of men? When John the Baptist asked: "Art thou He that should come?" was he not uttering the one question above all others that men in the early

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days did ask of Christ, and which they learned to answer with a triumphant "Yea"? When St. Paul asserts that He is the Yes to all the promises of God, does he not mean that for ages God had been speaking to men, directing their thoughts, preparing them for a revelation of Himself that was to come, and that at length it did come in Christ, in Whom all the promises were fulfilled? In Him all their deepest longings which they had expressed in many ways were satisfied. There is that in Him which corresponds to the yearning soul of man. He fits the folds of man's nature.

If before Christ came men asserted a belief in a god-man, it meant that they sought a link between that spiritual power behind the world of things visible and their mortal life. They desired to know that the glory they dreamed as from afar could come to touch this earth and the hard-beset life of men. They dreamed of God manifest in the flesh. Something within them called for that.

If their minds had seized on the idea of a virgin birth, at the very least it meant that they longed for an act of God by which a new element coming from above might enter our human story, and one which human ancestry with its taint might be inadequate to explain or produce. The fact that

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they thought of it lifts a corner of the curtain from their souls. There, behind, we can feel their despair of human nature as they knew it without a Redeemer, their desire for a special creative act of God to effect their salvation.

And when they went a step further and asserted—even if only in a myth—a resurrection from the dead: was not that a promise in their hearts? Men have always been arrested by the mystery of death, that dread event which sets a term to human action and breaks off the purposes of even the noblest life. Is it hard to believe that the Spirit of God was behind a demand that we feel must have existed before ever any belief in the resurrection could spring up—that a man with God should be demonstrably stronger than death?

All these myths and legends are surely whisperings, promises, forefancyings of what should be.

II

Then at length came Jesus Christ. Some Jews found that He fulfilled the desires of Israel. Then others who were not Jews found that He met their need as well. Greeks and barbarians came to realize that He answered their longings. He was God's response to the aspiring of human nature everywhere when it

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turned to Him. "How many soever were the promises of God, in Him was the Yea."

He was the God-man. They never could think of Him as common clay, one with themselves in their weakness and defeat. They found that whenever they came to Him they could not escape a sense of God's presence.

They did not see how He could be explained by any merely human story. He was not of the earth, earthy. There was something new and strange in Him. God in some special way had to do with the creation of Christ. The only explanation they could give was that He was born of a virgin and the Holy Ghost.

They knew He lived, though crucified under Pontius Pilate. They were sure that His power was with them. The Cross was not the last word. They had the fact of the Christian Church in front of them, and it had been built upon faith in His resurrection; and a story like that of the early society of Jesus cannot be explained by a delusion or a lie.

When the Christians declare their God to be divine, born of a virgin, risen from the dead, they are saying that in Him the most fundamental of man's longings and aspirings had reached a goal.

The other religions that made similar assertions have gone down before Christ as stars pale in the light of day. The myths perished.

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Men turned to Him instead. Why should His story remain to grip man more and more while the other stories pass, unless it be that a fact can supersede a myth, and kill it?

This is the all-important thing to grasp: that in Jesus Christ men found an answer in history to the desires to which in other ages they had given intellectual or religious shape. So He becomes the Master of minds and souls of every age and condition.

III

St. Paul says that Christ is the wisdom of God to both Jews and Greeks. These two peoples had wrought out their questions on different lines. The former were driven by practical and religious interests, the latter rather by speculative. St. Paul says Christ has the answers for both. The ultimate questions were the same, as indeed they are for men in every age.

What lies behind the mystery and wonder of the world? What is man's relation to that supreme reality? How should he rule his life in such a universe? What is his destiny—*Quo vadis*? Philosophers may label these problems cosmological, theological, ethical, final—what they will. The Christian finds his answers in the truth and love and life of Christ, and it is strange to see how Jesus Christ in an ever-increasing degree is

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dominating the minds of men as they find in Him the answers to their questions, and the satisfaction of their needs.

He dominates their thoughts. The one thing men have never been able to do with Jesus Christ is to get rid of Him. He will not be ignored nor brushed aside. The human mind is compelled to consider Him. "That strange man from His Cross," wrote Father Tyrrell, "will not let it go." In the eighteenth century rationalism announced that Christianity was doomed, that within a century the religion of Christ would have ceased to hold men. In the nineteenth century a materialistic science believed it had undermined the foundations of all religion, and that Jesus Christ was discredited. Rationalism and materialism have had their day. Jesus Christ goes on. He is still there, challenging men, compelling their thought and their questions. More is written of Him in these days than was ever written before. The best thought of men is always approaching nearer to His.

And if He dominates the intellectual life of men, is He not also changing their emotional life as well? Hatred of the enemy was once a virtue. In these days we would forget our orgies of bitterness, and hymns of hate must be explained away or forgotten.

In ancient times compassion and pity were signs of weakness that a wise, strong man might never

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feel nor indulge. Whence comes our modern care for the unfit, the crippled? our concern for the aged and the children? Does man owe nothing here to nineteen centuries of the impact of Christ?

Or, consider the moral life of man. The moral leadership of the world is not with Osiris, Krishna, Confucius, Buddha, Mohammed—it is with Christ. A notable Hindu confessed some time ago that the other religions of India would pass away, while Jesus Christ would remain. Even now in Hinduism and Buddhism and Mohammedanism changes are taking place, and the secret is to be found not so much in reform from within as in the pressure of Christian standards from without. Soon or late our brethren born in other faiths will find that all that is good in them finds its fulfilment in Christ—that He is the Yea to the promises of God to them. He, as none other, satisfies the mind and the heart of man.

He stands alone and supreme. He towers above others as a mountain raises itself to the sky above the foothills which we take by the way. He is the last refuge of souls. Others have failed us. He never fails. That is the Christian experience behind the creeds. Every hope of forgiveness, every aspiration after goodness, every dream of victory and peace—all are fulfilled in Him. He is God's answer to our need: the Yea to all His promises.

CHRIST'S CALL TO AWAKE

By W. R. INGE, C.V.O., D.D.

Dean of St. Paul's.

“ Jesus said, For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see; and that they which see might be made blind.”—John ix. 39.

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FOR the first generation of Christians the drama of redemption was a tragedy in two acts, covering a very few years. The Christ had come once in the form of a servant ; His contemporaries would shortly see Him return in the form of a King. But this cramped and childlike interpretation of the greatest revelation ever made to mankind was only the outer form of a deep and saving faith, grounded not on the dreams of Jewish politicians, but on the new insight into eternal values which the Disciples had gained from their intercourse with Christ. The husk fell off easily and almost painlessly. The Kingdom of God became the Church, militant on earth, expectant in Paradise, triumphant in Heaven. The second coming faded into the dim and distant future. The Messianic attributes of Christ were in part thrown back upon His earthly ministry. By degrees these fluid conceptions crystallized into the popular orthodoxy which is still preached in our churches.

But in the Fourth Gospel we have a resolute attempt to penetrate the deeper meaning of

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these beliefs, and to bring out their spiritual and universal significance. St. John's treatment of the judgment is worthy of our most careful attention, and may well occupy our thoughts in the season of Advent. The popular teaching was and is : Christ came once to save the world ; He will come again to judge the world. St. John would have us understand that the two offices, of Saviour and Judge, cannot be separated. Christ is always Saviour ; and He is always Judge. By the mere fact of coming into the world, He winnows the wheat of humanity from the chaff. Wherever Christ is, there is salvation and condemnation. The Gospel brings life and light to some, darkness and destruction to others. Just as the man, blind from his birth, was restored to sight, while the Pharisees, proud of their skill in the law, were smitten with judicial blindness: so it must always be.

The call of Christ leaves no one where it found him. It forces upon us a choice which, but for that call, might not have come to us in so decisive a form. Every Advent we hear the same trumpet-call. " Now it is high time to awake out of sleep, for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed." Our salvation—so we hope ; but our judgment certainly, the final judgment to be passed upon our lives, is nearer, twelve months nearer, than

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when we last heard those words in the Epistle for Advent Sunday. Believe me, Bishop Butler's famous words are psychologically true; that passive impressions, impulses which are not acted upon, grow weaker at each repetition. To take a homely illustration, those who set an alarum to wake them at a certain hour will hear it every day if they get up when it sounds ; but if they go to sleep again, they will soon slumber through it.

It has been said of a great man, that he passed through the dream of life as one awake. Genius is life at a higher power, at a greater intensity. The great man sees more clearly, feels more deeply, wills more strenuously, than ordinary men. He is more thoroughly awake, more alive, than other people.

We are such creatures of habit, we live so much in ruts, that when a great thing happens we do not realize it. Even if it closely touches ourselves, we are slow to understand all that it means to us. An unexpected sorrow is, perhaps, mercifully blunted for our sense. We know that it is true ; but even while we are thinking of it, our thoughts run back to the old channels. We listen for the footstep or the voice which we shall never hear again. We wait still for the touch of the vanished hand ; we turn over our little pile of letters, and look for the well-known handwriting. A sudden

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joy is almost equally stunning. We ask ourselves wonderingly why we do not feel the exultation which we should have expected. The news is still external to us : " like a tale of little meaning, though the words are strong." The new experience soaks in by degrees ; but we never realize it all at once in its total meaning.

In matters that do not touch our surface-life, we have to allow not merely for defective sensibility, but for the blindness caused by selfishness. There are many people who go through life with no eyes except for what may help or hinder them in carrying out their schemes for " getting on." These are the so-called " practical men," who, as they trot along the broad road in their self-chosen blinkers, miss all the finer meanings and nobler uses of life more completely than the average commonplace and unambitious person whom they despise. Their doom was uttered long ago. " He gave them their desire, and sent leanness withal into their soul." They have chosen to live without love, and in missing that they have missed all.

The great crises of history, and the great revolutions or revelations in human knowledge, have been most strangely impotent to move the mass of mankind out of their familiar ruts. For instance, the city of Rome, owing mainly to

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obvious geographical advantages, was for many centuries mistress of the Mediterranean basin, which then almost comprised the civilized world ; and so strong is the force of habit that to this day many millions of Christians are convinced that in the counsels of God there must always be a universal Church with its seat of government on the banks of the Tiber. Again, modern astronomy has long ago shattered the old religious geography of the universe ; but old habits of thought are too strong for new knowledge. The world of many Christians is still a building in three storeys. More recently, the discovery of evolution has left nothing in politics, theology, or morals, quite where it was before. The fact of our real kinship with all that lives and moves in the world does not detract one atom from the glory and dignity of the humanity which God created after His Own image, and which His Son deigned to take upon Him for our sakes ; but it does add a new lustre, a new sacredness, to the rest of creation and to the laws which it obeys. It does give a new force to that wonderful chapter of Romans in which St. Paul declares his hope that the creation will be delivered from the bondage of corruption ; it does help us to understand the Pauline and Johannine doctrine that in the Son of God, the Word, all things subsist. It certainly

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involves a new responsibility in our dealings with the lower animals, our poor relations. But these truths will take centuries to soak into the popular mind.

The Gospel of Christ was a greater revolution than any of these discoveries. Think what it must have been to the first Disciples of Jesus to find that the Kingdom to which they were invited was not of this world. Think of the terrible wrench in giving up those patriotic dreams which had comforted the Jews through centuries of exile, persecution, and servitude. Think of the shock at being bidden to welcome to the society of the redeemed the uncircumcised Philistine, the heretical Samaritan, the barbarian and the Scythian. And what rare greatness there was in St. Paul, that he realized nearly all that it meant ! The spiritual Israel instead of the nation ; the indwelling Spirit of Christ instead of the priests and temple ; the entirely new standard of values—the loving, unselfish heart, which, in having nothing, possesses all things, instead of the worldly prosperity which in the old Testament is the sign of God's favour—the law of living sacrifice, of gain through pain, of life through death—the sublime triads of faith, hope, love, and love, joy, peace—all these things, in which the originality and far-reaching import of the Gospel mainly

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consists, were seized and realized by St. Paul as they have been by few since. He saw at once what it must mean for him personally. The whole course of his life was changed. Those things which before were gain to him he now counted but refuse, that he might "win Christ." The Incarnation had altered everything, and it surprised him that others did not see that it had altered everything. There must be a veil on their hearts ; they must be asleep and dreaming. It is strange to him that people can go on living as if the light of the Glory of God had not shone upon them in the face of Jesus Christ. "Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall shine upon thee."

What would St. Paul say to us to-day, if he were preaching in this greatest of the churches dedicated in his name ? Is the world a different place to you and me because Christ has lived in it ? Is our hope in Christ the decisive factor in the principles that we live by, in the things that we desire for ourselves and our children ? We think we believe, I know ; but is our faith awake, or is it lying bedridden in some dormitory of our soul ? Is it part of us at all, or furniture stacked in a lumber-room ?

Let it be our special business this Advent to make our religion alive and wideawake. To

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begin with, let us make sure what we really *believe*. Some teachers would have us regard the Creed as a "deposit," something to be kept safe and handed back intact. "Lord, here is Thy pound, which I have kept wrapped up in a napkin. Lo, here Thou hast what is Thine." But surely, my brethren, what matters is how deeply we believe, not how much we accept. It is better to believe in one Article than to assent to Thirty-nine. The rudimentary creeds in the New Testament are theologically very imperfect, but those who held them were willing to die for them.

Secondly, we need to quicken our *feeling* of the truth of our religion. We must practise "recollection," with short prayers and acts of uplifting the mind to God, many times during the day. If we give about sixteen hours a day to this world, and about five sleepy minutes to the other, it is no wonder if God and Heaven seem rather shadowy things to us.

And, of course, we must *act* as persons who are awake. Our consciousness of the great revelation of the Gospel must show itself in the consecration of our whole life, "whether we eat or drink or whatsoever we do." It must, above all things, deepen our love to God and our neighbour. "If ye know these things," said our Lord,

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“happy are ye if ye do them.” “He that saith, I know God, and keepeth not His commandments, is a liar !” says St. John, bluntly.

So, by God's grace, the call to awake out of sleep may not be lost upon us. So our eyes may be opened to see God and do His will. And so a life of ever-increasing alertness and watchfulness may be the prelude of that clearer vision when, after the sleep of death, we shall wake up after God's likeness and shall be satisfied with it.

THE COMING OF THE KINGDOM

BY T. A. LACEY, M.A., F.S.A.

Canon of Worcester.

“ If any man shall say unto you, Lo, here is Christ, or there ; believe it not.”—Matt. xxiv, 23.

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A WARNING. Sufficiently impressive, you might think, but strangely disregarded. At all times in the history of Christianity there have been men who would point to the immediate coming of Christ, with particularity of time and place ; at all times they have had deluded followers, and the shame of repeated disappointment seems to be no hindrance. Some of us can remember startling examples of this kind of prediction. When I was a boy there was a whole group of them, alike in the main, but differing in particulars. All who put them forth were equally confident, and each one contradicted others. They speculated on wars and rumours of wars, on earthquakes and famines, forgetting that most ages are very much alike in that respect, and treating their own age as exceptional ; they made ingenious arithmetical calculations based on texts of Scripture imperfectly understood. Others relied on the disappearance of faith from the earth, which meant chiefly a disregard of their own predictions. Some of them abounded in promises, declaring that the hundred and forty and

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four thousand of the redeemed would be made up exclusively from their own adherents. The wilder follies or wickednesses of this kind hardly call for explanation ; but there were—and there still are—men of a very different stamp, men of unquestionable piety, men of considerable learning, devoting themselves to studies of the same kind ; they earnestly desire the coming of the Lord, and they try to ascertain its approach in the very way which the Lord himself discouraged: “ It is not for you to know the times or seasons.” The un-availing search goes on continuously. How shall we account for it ?

There was in the days of the Gospel a vague expectation, hope or fear, of a great catastrophe which should usher in the Kingdom of God. This was general ; but some reduced the vagueness to precise detail, and wrote exact predictions of varied character. Their writings were what we now call eschatological, teaching about the End of the World. The Lord Jesus, in declaring that the Kingdom of God was at hand—which is the first meaning of the Gospel, the Good News—did not brush aside these expectations, nor even these predictions. That was not his way. He made use of them as imagery of the truth which he had to impart. There was no difficulty about this for one who habitually

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taught by parables. I will come back presently to the truth which was so taught, but I must first remind you that almost all the disciples of our Lord had been in the habit of taking that imagery as reality, an exact description of things that were actually going to happen. Such a habit of mind is not easily cast off, and even the most intimate disciples clung to it with amazing tenacity. The result was that two currents of thought continued to run side by side ; on the one side the plain teaching of the Lord about things actually true, on the other side the imagery in which the truth had been wrapped. To take familiar examples, you will find the imagery treated as prediction of actual fact in the first Epistle to the Thessalonians : " The Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the Archangel and with the triumph of God : and the dead in Christ shall rise first : then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the air : and so shall we ever be with the Lord." The writer of that description was perhaps Silvanus, St. Paul's companion, but it was written with St. Paul's approval ; and five or six years afterwards something of the same sort was written, with greater sobriety, in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, which was certainly

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St. Paul's own. But alongside of this you also find something of a different kind ; not prediction of an end to come, but recognition of an end that has arrived. The stories of the Old Testament were written, says St. Paul, " for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come." That became the conviction of the Apostolic Church. " Little children, it is the last time," wrote St. John. Nay, what he wrote is more emphatic : " It is the latest hour." This way of looking at the end finds its completion in the Book of the Revelation of John, where all the old imagery is used with extreme vividness, no longer as prediction, but as imagery of a present reality, of things actually taking place. It is always, " I saw," and known events of history can be identified in the visions alongside of the invisible events of the Spirit. This is not to say that there is no prediction at all in that great prophetic book. There is prevision, there is prediction, and this also is wrapped up in imagery, not easily to be disentangled ; but the imagery of the book deals more with things past and present, such as the great fire at Rome and the persecution of Christians which ensued upon it, than with things to come. Think of the description of the first Resurrection, Christ's faithful witnesses raised from death here and now to reign with

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the Lord in the City which is even now coming down from God out of Heaven. The sense of the book is that there is much yet to happen, but that even now it is the time of the end ; the judgment is set and the books are opened.

How did the Church come to this consciousness of the end as actually present? You must go back to the personal teaching of the Lord Jesus. Using the eschatological imagery of the time, he led men away from the habit of taking it for reality. They were not anxiously to scan the future, "for, behold, the Kingdom of God is within you." Perhaps the words mean rather "in your midst," but the sense remains the same, for this kingdom is invisible to eyes that look on outward things. He proclaimed the immediate coming of the Kingdom; men then living should see its coming. There is no escape from it. "This generation shall not pass away till all be fulfilled." Do not listen to quibbles about the meaning of so plain a sentence. If you wish for something even more explicit, you can find it : "There be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death till they have seen the Kingdom of God come with power."

But then two questions insist on being heard. The first : When that generation was long since passed away, how could men who believed the

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words of the Lord Jesus look for the coming of the Kingdom in the future? The second: How and when did the Kingdom come? It is with the second that I am most concerned.

A careful reading of the Gospel will give you the answer. At first you hear Jesus proclaiming in the most general terms that the Kingdom is at hand. Then there is a limit of time fixed; the Kingdom was to come in the life-time of men then living. But still, the day and the hour no man knows, "No, not the angels which are in Heaven, neither the Son, but the Father." But at last the Son knows the day and the hour, and declares it. You have the declaration of Jesus before Caiaphas. "Now and from this time onward ye shall see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of power and coming in the clouds of Heaven." I give you the full force of the words, which is weakened in our English version. Here is something future, but also a present reality. The evangelists who recorded the prediction of the Kingdom within that generation recorded also this more tremendous affirmation. You cannot imagine them recording either unless they were convinced that the prediction was fulfilled and the affirmation proved true. "Now, and from this time onward." He who made the affirmation was soon to hang on the Cross, and there the robber

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pleaded for remembrance when the Kingdom should come. But the answer brushed aside the hope of an uncertain future : “ To-day shalt thou be with me in paradise.” The Lord spoke as reigning king, lifted up on the Cross against the clouds of heaven—and Caiaphas saw. Saw what ? Who shall say ? There is a prophecy quoted as apt : “ They shall look on Him whom they pierced.” Did he see beyond ? But even the faithful who saw were slow to understand, and even after the Resurrection they still teased the Master with questions about the times and seasons of the Kingdom. The old answer was given once more : the Father has put these things in his own power ; but then there was a promise : “ Ye shall receive power ”—it is not the same word in the Greek, but the connection seems obvious—“ after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you.” The Holy Ghost came, and Peter at once declared the meaning of it, as spoken by Joel the prophet : “ It shall come to pass in the last days, saith God, I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh.” In the last days ! These men were they upon whom the ends of the world were to come. In the light of the Resurrection they saw and understood the Cross, the coming of Christ into His Kingdom ; and they proclaimed it. “ Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly

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that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ."

And yet we pray, "Thy Kingdom come!" and the language of futurity has never ceased. Eyes still fail with looking upward. At the end of the apostolic age men were querulously asking "Where is the promise of His coming?" It was necessary to warn them that, although they were indeed living in the last day, yet the Day of the Lord may well outlast a thousand years of man's reckoning. There is still a future: the completion of the Day. But the Day is here, and we are living in it. Our eyes do see the establishment of the Kingdom, though not yet its final triumph. Our eyes do see the throne set, and judgment given. For it is the Day of Judgment in which we live. It is when Judgment becomes terrible that we are most aware of its presence; but present it is always, whether in the stirring of a single conscience or in the crash of an empire. The Kingdom present and Judgment present are not to be denied. They force themselves upon the Christian understanding, even when the tendency to futurity and expectancy is at the strongest. Our Advent hymns are almost inevitably controlled by that tendency, but the truth breaks through:

"Great God, what do I see and hear!"

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It is the cry of a soul conscious of the Kingdom and of Judgment. And there is an answer no less conceived in terms of the present :

“ Lo, he comes in clouds descending.”

The use of imagery is not obsolete. The meaning of the imagery is not completely realized, and until that be done, alike in thought and in action, the language of imagery will be a wholesome stimulant. But we must remember that it is imagery of the present as well as of the still veiled future. We must hold fast, with whatever difficulty, the consciousness of the Last Day, of the Kingdom come, in which the Church of the Apostles rejoiced and endured.

It is a general consciousness, common to the whole Church, however dimly illuminated, and we must hold it fast. We are not to look for Christ here or there, in local or temporal manifestation : “ For as the lightning, that lighteneth out of the one part under Heaven, shineth unto the other part under Heaven, so shall also the Son of Man be in his day.” The Kingdom is in our midst, established in the universal Church of Christ ; it is within us, wheresoever Christ reigns in the hearts of the simple. “ I saw, and behold a white horse ; and he that sat on him had a bow ; and a crown was given unto him : and he went forth conquering and to conquer.”

HE CAME TO SAVE

By LAUCHLAN MACLEAN WATT, D.D.

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“ This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”—1 Timothy i. 15.

He Came to Save

I

WHEN human struggle emerges from the mist into the light of history, we find Greek, Hebrew, Egyptian, all groping in a reeling world for some sure standing ground, holding out blind hands for the grip of some certain hope, yearning for the sorrow of their empty hearts to be transformed by the secret of ever-eluding gladness. It is as marvellous as it is true, how many groppers after God have left their cry recorded, in some form or other, in old literatures. Yet, through all the darkness there is, alongside of this utterance of need, the acknowledgment of the wondrous light of a hope, in the advent of One in Whom might be found what their own natures did not give them—freedom from degrading passions, liberation from low desires, the victory over meanness and uncleanness, satisfaction of the hunger for the things that do not die. And it was naturally so, for, of course, the moment a man looks into his own heart, he knows that he is enslaved—he knows that he might do better than spend his life

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stumbling through blind alleys ; he knows his aspirations are infinite, and that the wings of his soul were meant to be stretched out in heavenward soarings, not to be cramped in hindering environments. He knows that he was meant to stand up before God in a clean, pure manhood, not dragged at the heels of passion, not swirled through the gasping fever of sin—that the divine within him was to be kept clean, and not to be obscured, but to be brought into harmony with the life invisible, which, though at present broken from his hand-grip, is yet, somehow, waiting on the other side till Love shall fling a line across to lead him into peace. The darkest phases of the spiritual history of the world were thus shot through with mystic gleams whereby the inner divine found deep revealings. In these bright moments man saw written on the ruins of his nature that which told him that something of God was his, as some proud name which shone upon the waters long ago in beauty and in strength is seen upon wreckage in the sludge of the ebb of a tidal river. This glimmering hint of something better that had been, and something better that might be, kept hope alive within the soul, and guided it in its yearning. And there emerged the true meaning of sin, namely, that the sinner was one who had “missed the mark,” walked

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wide of the true way, lost the line of the path of life itself. And unto some there rose the full glory of the vision of God—a God holy above the awfulness of human sin ; with the knowledge that only by low ways of suffering and of pain close-set with thorns, and shut about with crosses, could the human spirit climb those shining heights white with the loving presence of its God.

Now God the Holy One can never be reconciled to man the sinner except through pity. Yet God's pity cannot alone suffice. It must be rooted in justice, and not in soft-hearted weakness, like that of an indulgent father whose indulgence spoils his children. The balance of the moral universe must be restored. Man cannot be brought back into the life in God without pain, for his pride of heart must be broken by himself or by heaven.

Man is, through sin, the antagonist of God. Sin is wilful pride and must be humbled. The entanglements of broken commandments on the way to heaven pierce the feet like flints. Sin is the poisoning of the wells of life, which should ever flow Godwards ; and the mystery of Christ is the mystery of the healing and sweetening of the waters by the Cross of Love.

Sin is the blind Samson pulling down the temple of the soul ; Christ is the manifestation of restoring Love among the ruins. If the Builder had

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pain, shall not the Rebuilder have wounds? Hence, in the Christ Who saves must be found, alike, sufferings and victories divine and human—the agony and the victory of God, the anguish and the victory of man.

Especially does the knowledge that God would one day begin His work of restoration, come to us through the pages of the Psalmists and the Prophets, who read in individual and national experience, the needs of human nature, and the secret of their healing. They felt sure that God would save Zion, that He would rend the heavens and come down—that behind the changing scenes of history His mercy waited for its hour. And at last the fulness of God's time came, and with it the answer to human problems.

There was, then, the fact of a cleavage between God and man, which human feet could never cross, and human hands could never bring together—a vast abyss, from traversing which the soul shrank in fear of the Unknown; and God seemed thrust afar from the souls that He had made, and who, without Him, were as good as dead. What was needed to save the world from suicide was the grasping of the human by the divine, a stretching forth of the humanness of the fatherly in God, towards the divinest in man—a heavenly hand among the broken strings, a re-attunement

He Came to Save

of the nature all at discord, a setting of the chords again to the great music of celestial spheres which, like a baptism, had fallen around the spirit long ago in the beginning.

Now, had Jesus of Nazareth not appeared as a reviving influence, a quickening personality, a life-giving life, there was little but moral and spiritual disaster before the world. For there was no answer to the questionings, no solution of the gropings, no consolation for the sorrowings of humanity. Natural religion gave no solace to the soul. The still small voice, when it was listened to at all, within the heart, only rebuked it to a sense of the entirely incomplete. The gods had forsaken their altars, the ashes of the temple fires were cold, the oracles were dumb ; yet, for the first time, a possibility of universal empire had come to men, through the roads which the Roman had opened across the world, and through the flexible language of the Greek, which had made men's hearts responsive to the interpretation of spiritual ideals in glowing words.

II

How then did Christ come ? He came, not as a Cæsar or a Herod, not born in a royal palace, from which He would have had to break out

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for His world-work, as did His great forerunner, Moses, carrying with him, on his own part—as an insuperable barrier between him and the naked, the poor, the down-trodden and the sad, the aimless, and those whose hope had died—that lack of intimate knowledge of the inner and outer life of the friendless and forlorn, and awakening, on their part, that prejudice against aristocratic interference, which undoubtedly hampered the work of the great leader of early Israel. God's best growth in this world springs from within and beneath, and he who is to save the poor, in the day when only the rich and powerful are accounted anything, must begin among the poorest. The poor man Christ, no spare-time philanthropist, must He be. Hence His kinship with Sorrows. For He Who would heal the broken hearts must have deep scars in His own ; and He Who would wipe the tears from weeping eyes must have known what it was to have God's healing of His own pain. The Saviour of all ranks has got to break into palaces, from the side where the windows do not look upon the sins and sorrows of the poor.

And, yet again, the Saviour of the sorrows of men, the Uplifter of the hopes of broken humanity, was most suitably born into that race, which, more than any race in all the world, has been the

He Came to Save

vehicle of human desolation, of mortal sickness and want and pain, driven through all the nations of the world, landless and without a home. For God was going to save men, not through poetry or art, which was the channel of the Greek—not through law and military conquest, which was the channel of the Roman—not through mysticism of animalism, which was the channel of the Egyptian, and certainly never through the voluptuousness of lust, which, like a blood-stain, tarnished the records of them all—but by the knowledge of Himself, revealed in a broken and a contrite heart—through the manifestation of His love in a Redeemer, Who was not only the Master of ethical truths, and Teacher of forbearance and brotherliness in a world of unkindly impatience, but also, and above all, the Friend of souls, the Comrade of struggling humanity, the Guide of suffering hearts, the Reconciler with God, the Man of Sorrows, acquainted with grief; with Whom, and in the heart of Whose sufferings was the anodyne of all the ages' pain, the solution of the universal secret.

And further—one must enter into the confused issues of human hopes and failures, human sin and pain, who could stand before God for the race with example, propitiation, reconciliation, and atonement. Hence the broken, poor

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man Christ, naked as the most naked whom He came to clothe in love, scarred as the most stricken of those whom sin had wounded, divine in love and pity as the most Divine, and human as myself, must come, or God's grip on the souls that He has made is lost, and His purposes are futile entirely.

Now, of the holy transaction between Christ and God hid within the veil, I know nothing, but this, verily, I know—and, though I found it for myself to be true, others have learned it before me, for there were broken hearts, many, since Paul's was broken in the dust of the ways of human pride—the hand that has healing in it must have scars, for the very soul it heals wounds it. And this, also, I know, that no man can carry my sorrows better than I can carry them myself ; no man can take from me the sins by which I have known music and won tear-bringing laughter ; and no man can carry my broken heart, or my ruined health, or my spirit shattered through my sin. No man is strong enough, pure enough, brave enough, rash enough for that. Yea, even though a man stand forth in crowded court and take my blame upon his head, and go to prison and to scorn under the censure of my crime, still on my soul a punishment remains ; and day, with its shining sun, pierces me with sorrow, and

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the woodland, all a-babble with the sigh of leaves and ripple of the streams, makes me ashamed of my guilt before God ; and night becomes filled with a thousand eyes of sad and scornful rebuke above me. Yet, knowing this, if One came to me saying that He came to save me from these things, to carry the ache incessant from my heart, to cleanse the stain that lies upon my soul known only to myself and God, to give me joy for tears, and peace for pain's unrest, I must follow Him ; and I should know Him to be what He claimed to be—man, yet greater than man—by the face marred more than the faces of the sons of men, by the hand wounded with the nails of others, by the peace that would fall into my heart through Him. For the divine atonement of Christ Jesus leaves no sting behind. Perfect peace is given by Him when He heals our wounds.

III

“ HE CAME TO SAVE ”

That statement heads many a page in the Philosophy of History. No view of the history of the world can be the true view which ignores His peerless influence. Through a door of mystery beyond our understanding—to speak of which is, to us, well-nigh blasphemy, a thing to

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be hid in the holy of holies veiled—the Divine became human, and looked upon the sorrows of the world and the sin and shame of men through the eyes of the saddest race the world has known. And He saw that nakedness and poverty are better than riches and possessions won at the cost of unrest and weariness of the soul—that a soul's pilgrimage falls short of heaven, because it most often walks its way overburdened with earthly things—that the far-off God could only be brought near by the channel of a Father's pity ; and that the only avenue to restoration of the lost graces of the spiritual life was by the crucifixion of self upon the Cross of the sorrows and the sins of others. And so He gave Himself, living and dying, a sacrifice for men ; showing that out of the grave of the old rises the new life which is the true life, and that only through a death and resurrection in Him does a man find his best self, and become a fellow-labourer with God.

Now the evidence for the historical reality of Christ's advent was the personal experience of those who beheld Him, who heard Him speak, and saw Him do His works of love and pity, healing and help. And the greatest Christian evidence is still just the testimony of the experience of those who have been brought into contact with Christ the Comforter in their sorrow, the

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Comrade in their loneliness, the Uplifter in their sin. No argued creed, no philosophical treatise, has half the strength of that.

It is difficult to remove prejudice by books of argument. To write volumes on the saving grace of Jesus will not move the stumbling-stone of stubborn prejudice from the pathway of the soul. But one heart made clean, one life that was unlovely made pure and sweet—a man, or above all, a woman, whom acts of magistrates, the severities of police courts, the censure of society, the shame of absolute ostracism, the silent streets filled with unrecognizing faces, could not redeem—such an one saved from the horror of criminal impurities, cruelties, passionate revelries of sin and crime, by the Spirit of God, with the balm of the love of Christ, is the greatest proof of all that He comes to save.

The poet spake truth, who, in his great vision, met suddenly in hell one whom he knew in Florence, and of whose death he had not heard when he left that city for his doleful pilgrimage. And he said, "What? art thou too dead?" "Nay," sorrowfully replied the melancholy shade, "I am not dead; but, though my body lives in Florence, my soul for these long years has been in hell." Yet who, that knows anything of human life and human strife and sin, and the war of man's

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soul against God, has not beheld even such a soul led back as from hell itself, by the gentle pity of Christ, where a mother's prayers, and a wife's pleading, a sister's tears, and a child's distress, have been unavailing as water spilt on sand? The mystery of the love of Jesus Christ, Whom, having not seen, we yet feel moving in still moments through our lives, has broken the bonds of sin, and opened wide again the gate of life.

Now, what Christ does in lives like these, He did for the nations and the ages of the world's history. He took the civilizations of Greece and Rome and bound the screaming eagles to the Cross, making the empires, which had conquered the world in their strength and blood, empires of love and truth. He brought the dying and the poor from the palace gates into the very hearts of kings and princes ; and He made poverty, weakness, namelessness, and sorrow, holy things, through His pity and His love. And what He did, He does still. For He did not come to save only those of His own day, of His own race, of His own name. He came to save you and me, as well as Paul and Silas, Martha and Mary, Nicodemus and Matthew. It is this personal dealing with the individual soul that makes the matter specially dear to us as it was to Paul. He came to make our hearts clean places where

He Came to Save

sweet love could dwell ; to make our hands white with helpfulness, though they may be scarred in the helping of others. He came to save us from the dying worship of a dying world's glittering store, from the fear and the praise of men, from the thought of reward or censure as the meed of our life—from sin, however secret—from sorrow, however bitter—from shame, like cancer in our hearts.

Oh, who can bar the door against the knocking of the Prince of Peace ? What window can be closed against the Love that stands amid the thorns for you and me ? And who forget the love of God that gave us Christ Who is our Saviour and the loving brother of all ?

Lord, it is my chief complaint
That my love is weak and faint,
Yet I love Thee, and adore ;
O for grace to love Thee more.

→ The most barren batch
of sermons I have ever read
- Who asked you to read them?
I agree with
Amen

PART II
CHRISTMAS SERMONS

A CHRISTMAS SERMON

By E. W. BARNES, Sc.D., F.R.S.

Bishop of Birmingham.

*“ But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them
in her heart.”—Luke ii. 19.*

A Christmas Sermon

It is sometimes said that religious worship is dying out in Europe, at any rate among the more civilized peoples and in particular among ourselves. If, in demurring, one points to the popularity of Christmas, the rejoinder is instantly made that Christmas is the festival of mother and child, and not specially of the birth of Jesus. To some extent the contention holds good. The Child in the manger at Bethlehem, His Mother bending over Him in love, the Wise Men bringing their gifts and the angels singing their salutation of peace and good will—all these pictures symbolize alike our reverence for motherhood and our belief that, if the children could preserve, unsullied, the simple goodness that is in them, they would avoid our mistakes and bring order and peace to the world.

But it is often forgotten that such reverence and faith are peculiarly associated with Christ's teaching. Heathenism of old had no festival like Christmas, though coarse myths and rites in primitive religion connected

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human fertility with Nature's profusion. We find no trace of the joy of Christmas in any Old Testament ritual. Because Jesus extolled the so-called womanly virtues, because He insisted that the qualities which good women naturally show are of more value than physical strength or intellectual power or quick and dominating decision—it is, I believe, chiefly because this teaching has steadily won acceptance that we give to women the honour which we have come to regard as their due, and to motherhood an especial reverence. It is largely because Jesus said: "Suffer the little children to come unto Me, and forbid them not ; for of such is the Kingdom of God," that we turn to the children with wistful hope. The Jews put the Garden of Eden in the distant past, and thought that only through catastrophe could the world be redeemed. For other ancient races the Golden Age lay behind the dawn of history. Jesus placed it in the future, when children should grow up undefiled. So, when His disciples disputed as to who should be greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven, He set a little child in the midst of them as a symbol of the uncorrupted grace that God desires men to gain. If you reflect upon these facts you will realize that Christmas is indeed the festival of the Spirit of Christ. It has been made by the

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power of His teaching. It flourishes because men and women, often quite unconsciously, have accepted a view of human life and of human destiny which came from Him.

Every great discovery lights up the thought of Christ ; and the modern doctrine of evolution bears witness to His wisdom. We are now assured that the future, and not the past, holds the perfection of human development so far as it will be achieved on earth. From St. Paul, and the long array of somewhat pessimistic theologians, there has come an emphasis on Original Sin, which we now view as the inheritance of animal instincts that have not been overcome : but we are nearer the thought of Jesus when we regard man's slow evolution as the plan of Divine Love. In the progress which the children will achieve and in turn hand on to their children, we see the nature of Divine redemption, the overcoming of evil by good, a pledge that God is Love. The children hold the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven in so far as that Kingdom will ever be established on earth. In paying homage to them we pay homage to the progress that shall yet be made, and assert our belief that in the natural, no less than in the spiritual, world, good will triumph over evil. And the end will be achieved not by any false asceticism,

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not by any emptying of life, but by accepting natural conditions, of body and soul alike, as part of the plan of God; and by so using each that life is filled with forgiveness, hope and love. Men must trust God as a child trusts father and mother, must enjoy His gifts with a child's simplicity, must forget injuries with a child's ready affection, must share the child's eager desire for truth unsullied by subtlety or compromise, must call out love and respond to love: because God has made us His sons that we may love Him.

Such was Christ's teaching: and such is the understanding of the meaning of human life that the manifold tragedies of the world combine to emphasize. As men feel that this teaching is true, and make it guide their lives; they follow Christ and preserve the spirit that gives to the Christmas season the beauty of holiness.

Thus, as I muse upon Christmas, I regard confident assertions of decay of faith in Christ as false. The outward expression of belief is obviously changing. Intellectual progress, never more rapid than during the last half-century, has done much to alter the scheme of thought in which the Gospel of Christ was cradled. Our liturgy retains ideas that we could profitably abandon, that must be abandoned before it can be easy for

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the children of the New Renaissance to come to our churches to worship God in spirit and in truth. But belief in Christ as Way, Truth and Life is not really decaying. It will grow progressively stronger if the churches concede, or, better, assert that many facts in which our forefathers believed implicitly we may treat as allegories. We know, for instance, that the beautiful stories of the Saviour's early life given by St. Matthew and St. Luke are pronounced by scholars to be late in origin. The infancy-narratives of the two Evangelists can only with difficulty be reconciled. They carry us into a region where poetry and romance interpret the glory of an unseen world. Their quality differs profoundly from that of the sober record of the later life of Jesus. Many scholars conclude that it is safer to regard them as poetic symbolism rather than actual history. Let it be so. Let us take the Christmas passage that was read from St. Luke this morning, the first twenty verses of his second chapter, to be an imaginative picture. Is it really of any less value? Is it not a profoundly beautiful study of Christ, which appeals to us all because it perfectly embodies spiritual truth? When the Gospels were written Jesus had lived and taught and died, perfect in goodness, unrivalled in moral insight and moral courage,

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supreme in His constant sense of the Presence of God. He had preached the good news, the Gospel of salvation ; had shown Himself the Shepherd of the lost sheep of the world ; had proclaimed good tidings of great joy. Men through His guidance trod the way of peace : the humble and meek through Him felt themselves enriched as they shared His spiritual confidence, His trust in God. His death they had come to regard not as a disgrace or a tragedy, but as the pledge of God's love. He, Himself, was the fullness of the Light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world. *These* are the supreme facts of the Christian revelation, as certain to us now as they were to the first two generations of Christ's followers. And these facts shine through the stories of the Saviour's birth. They form, indeed, the very substance of those stories. Take any Christmas-Day story from the Gospels, and you will see in it the interpretation of some aspect of the Lord's wonderful life. Ask yourself why you treasure the picture, and you will realize that the reason is that it helps you in one particular to understand Jesus better. He Who said of Himself : " The foxes have holes, the birds of the air have nests ; but the Son of Man hath not where to lay His head," was born in a stable and laid in a manger, for there was no room

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in the inn. He Who proved Himself the promised Messiah, great David's greater Son, was born in the royal city of Bethlehem. The birth of Him Who was the Good Shepherd, Who laid down His life for the sheep, was revealed to shepherds protecting their flock by night. The glory of the Redeemer Who lived in the presence of God was sung by the angels of God. The power of His Gospel was proclaimed by the heavenly salutation: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." And just as good men are drawn to Jesus as to a spiritual magnet, so the shepherds came to see the Infant Lord. Suppose we refuse to affirm what we cannot rigorously prove to be truth. Grant the shaping of allegory by popular fancy. We still ask—Is the allegory not perfect? Do we not treasure the stories of the Saviour's birth just because they convey spiritual realities that grow dim when we seek by precise statement to express them? The stories, the carols that are founded upon them, the hymns which we call the *Magnificat* and the *Nunc dimittis*, make a never-failing appeal because they preserve the essential meaning of the Incarnation, of God's revelation of Himself in Jesus. The philosophic theologian will say that in Jesus the Word, Who from the beginning was with God and was God, came into the world

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to live among men. How can we explain that unique outpouring of spiritual reality, that revelation of the supernatural, except by allegory and poetry?—

“How silently, how silently
The wondrous gift is given ;
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven.

No ear may hear His coming,
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still,
The dear Christ enters in.”

Jesus made our Christmas because the whole spirit of the day is His. He has taken to Himself all the customs with which we surround the memory of His birth. Our carols are largely fanciful. Holly and mistletoe are a gift from paganism. So pagan were the associations of mistletoe that even now we hesitate to put it in our churches. We do not actually know the day of the year on which Jesus was born. And yet Christmas Day is supremely His—His alone—because it has been consecrated for humanity by His life and love.

My friends, the greatest truths of all we can only feel. We reach them through picture and fancy, through poetry and music. When the mind

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is bewildered by shadows, some uplift within us reveals the light. There are regions of the world of the spirit into which we can only enter if we become as little children, content with stories that are symbols of what Shorthouse termed "the fathomless infinite beyond." How can we possibly give adequate reasons why Jesus, the Carpenter of Nazareth, the obscure Galilean villager, should be the central figure in human history? Did the problem escape St. Luke, the cultured Greek physician, when he tried to set forth in order things most surely believed among us? Is he not probably hinting at it when he says that "Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart"? Did she, with her understanding quickened by a mother's love, see through the veil of time and space that surrounds us all? St. Luke does not say so. She kept these things, and pondered them in her heart—and we cannot do better. As we, with her, bend over the Manger and seek to fathom the mystery of the Incarnation it is well if awe, reverence and love combine to let us hear the angels' song. We shall see but the resplendent commonplace of mother and child unless

"Earth breaks up, time drops away,
In flows heaven, with its new day
Of endless life."

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The eternal glory of the unseen will be hidden from us unless our hearts tell us that the village maiden's child is the new-born King :—

“ Hark! the herald angels sing:
Glory to the new-born King.”

We do not know the Father unless, on Christmas Day, we feel that we are in the presence of Him

“ Who trod,
Very Man and very God,
This earth in weakness, shame and pain; ”
of Him Who died upon the Cross, but yet to each one of us

“ Shall come again, no more to be
Of captivity the thrall,
But the one God, All in all.”

AND O THE DIFFERENCE TO ME !

BY JAMES BLACK, D.D.
Edinburgh.

“The Lord Jesus Christ—our hope.”

1 Timothy 1 1.

And O the Difference to Me!

I SLEPT : and as I slept, I dreamed a dream.

It seemed as if twenty centuries had rolled back, as one might turn the leaves of a book. I was standing on the ancient Appian Way along which the might and glory of Rome, in peace and war, had passed for generations. Beside me, set in the kindly shade of a grove of trees, I descried a little moss-covered temple of Æsculapius, the god of good gifts. Some stray people, peasants, by their dress, were even now seeking the god's graces of health and blessing : and it touched my heart to observe their wistful faces and look in their anxious eyes. I suppose the ages of the world are linked by their sorrows more than by anything else.

As puzzled as any by life's twisted ways, I stayed behind to meet the aged priest. Language, as we know, never causes any difficulty in one's dreams : and so I found myself speaking intimately with the old man, whose welcome to me was so kindly, out of eyes burdened with the sorrows of his fellow-men. No doubt, my questions seemed curious to him, for I could see

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a puzzled look flitting now and then across his face : but he answered me as honestly as he could, though clearly wondering at the drift of my mind.

I

My Questions to the Roman.

I found that I had three questions which my modern soul desired him to answer.

Thinking of our present-day views of religion, I asked him if he and his worshipping people honoured and loved their god ? In my waking moments I can still recall the puzzled look in his face as he answered, " Who ever loves a god ? We wisely fear our great and potent Æsculapius, for he has all the powers of blessing, fortune, and health in his hands. These quaint people of mine, who are the peasants of the district, come here only in trouble or sorrow to appease his anger and win back health for themselves or their loved ones. If all things go well with my people, if they are blessed with the clear red blood of youth, if our harvests are rich and tawny, and if our health and fortune are untouched, why ! they seldom trouble me or the god I serve. But—but—I do not know what you mean by loving Æsculapius ! "



And O the Difference to Me !

I turned then and put my second question to the old priest. " It is my ignorance, no doubt, good priest, but have your people no sense of deep spiritual need and some feeling of sin, which might bring them here to worship in their youth and in their health ? Do they not steal here some day to praise their god and ask pardon for their sin ? "

" Sin, stranger ! What do you mean by sin ? "

" A breach of the will of your god," I answered " a despising and breaking of his holy law."

Not easily shall I forget his curious smile. " Our god," he said, " does not work by will or by law. Who of us knows which day he will be angry, and may curse our fields with blight and our bodies with disease ? No man can know the mind of a god—we can only be chary lest we annoy him or unwittingly arouse his passionate anger. If you speak about purity and matters of right and wrong, these are the affairs of State. The laws of conduct are the work of men and not of the gods. Some of our gods, alas—if all tales be true—have little of conduct or character to their credit ! They live their own lives and take their own pleasures : and we are best pleased when their pleasures occupy their thoughts and take their minds away from

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us. I fear, good stranger, that I do not know what you mean by this sense of sin."



"One thing more, then," I answered, "and forgive me for my puzzled curiosity. What are the hopes of your people for this life and the life to come? What do your worshippers think of their eternal souls?"

"Perhaps the common people believe in the myth of a future life," he answered, "but now-a-days, no man of culture! Some of our poets and philosophers speak of a future life, but they have nothing to tell us. And in any case, they are only philosophers and dreamers! The creed of my god Æsculapius—(who, I am proud to say, has the largest following in Italy)—lies in this simple idea—make your days here as full, as rich, as merry, as healthful as you can, for at the best your time is brief and death soon overtakes all. Therefore, our great good is sound health and happy living. The weak, the burdened and the bereaved?—Oh, that is sad, no doubt: but what can one do? Our lot is woven from the web, and happy is he who has health and glad days. That is all. We have this short life, and we know of no other. It is wisdom therefore, to seize each day. We feel that it is bad

And O the Difference to Me !

luck for the poor and the broken. But it is the lot of the gods—what more can we say ? ”

II

My Questions to the Jew.

I reached the road again from the little shrine, somewhat sad and disillusioned, I fear. It all seemed so cruel, and aimless, and indiscriminate. I felt as if life were just an accident, and in most cases an unlucky accident. What better was I than a glorified beast of the field ? And was I “ glorified ? ”—for, at least, the beasts had no torturing questions and no foolish dreams that were born only to be strangled. As one or two anxious-faced people turned into the little bypaths leading to the shrine, I looked back and muttered: “ Vain hope and vain desire ! ”

I had not gone far along the Appian Way again, when I met a bustling company of soldiers walking in loose order, with a man in their midst, apparently a prisoner. As they were going Rome-wards, I turned and joined them. By the courtesy of their captain, I was permitted to chat with them and particularly to enter into talk with the man whom they were escorting.

A rather remarkable fellow, I found, a Jew, poorly clad, not over-strong in body. He was being taken from Jerusalem to be tried in the

III

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Roman courts, for although he was a Jew, he was also a Roman citizen ; and he had claimed the privilege of imperial rather than provincial justice. It seemed from the talk of the soldiers that the man had little chance of a reprieve or a release ; but this did not seem to discompose him, for I have seldom met one whose face was so strong or so happy. The soldiers had learned to respect and admire the poor enfeebled man, for they spoke openly of his courage and help during some great disaster which had been experienced on their voyage.

I hardly know what influenced me, perhaps my troubled spirit and my sense of depression after my visit to the ancient temple, but to my own amazement I found myself talking to this hirpling prisoner on the same topics as had moved my soul in the company of the old priest. (Each one of us knows how we invariably work conversation round to the questions that burden our hearts.)



I had asked him the first question, somewhat diffidently ; Since he was most likely going to die, did he have any god whom he could love and honour, and whose spirit might be a comfort to his soul ?

And O the Difference to Me !

“Do I ‘love and honour’ my God ?” he cried. “Why ! I am here in these bonds, and glorying in them, because I have preached the wonder and glory of His Name all over Asia. He is everything to me, and I am nothing without Him. I do not boast, but I say calmly that I have gladly given up everything for His loved Name. The very thought of Him is a joy in my heart.”—He broke into a kind of rhapsody, a lyric of rapture about this God he adored—His worth, His goodness, His beautiful mercy, and His astonishing remembrance. “It is my joy,” he cried, “my joy unspeakable; and, stranger, I would that thou wert altogether such as I am, except these bonds.”

* * *

The rapture of the broken prisoner was so amazing, that I felt I was in the presence of the only power that could lift a man above his circumstances, and make him master of his own soul. The contrast was ludicrous—a prisoner in chains, going to a certain death, and the clear exultation of a soul set free. Whether true or false, his faith was clearly something that could redeem.

So I plied him with that second question, which the old priest had answered so hopelessly. “‘A sense of need ?’ ‘A sense of sin ?’” he answered.

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“ I am full of it, crushed with it ! When I think of my sins, I feel that I am the most unworthy of men, one who deserves only to be a castaway. But yet my God, for love’s sweet sake, will receive me. He has declared His love and His pardon. If only I turn to Him, He will forgive me and cleanse me—and more, He will give me power to do better. My sin is great—none can feel it more—but the goodness of my Master is greater. You cannot know,” laying his hand on my arm, “ what a complete peace it gives me to know that my God makes me welcome, and will give me power to live my life in purer and finer ways.”



Knowing that he was going to Rome to be tried for life or death, I asked him the third question with all the hesitation one can imagine. It seemed a kind of impertinence to speak of this life, and the life to come, to a man who could not be sure how long he had to live ! But when I think of his answer to-day, in my waking hours, I rejoice that I overcame my diffidence : for in replying to this last query of mine, he seemed to forget himself completely, forget himself and his chains.

“ For your third question, good stranger, I have only this answer—here am I, going to Rome,

And O the Difference to Me !

a journey that may mean my end ; but though I have no wish to die, I have equally no fear to die. For one like me, by the goodness of the Lord I love, to die is gain : for I look forward to a fuller and richer life in the presence of my God. I have no fear—why should I have ? It does not matter what hardships assault me in this life—I know that underneath me are the everlasting arms of my Father. Far less does the future affright me, for my life here and always lies in His gentle hands. There is nothing unknown in the future, for God is there, awaiting me. Death to me is the coming of the Dawn—stranger, farewell ! ”

III

My Questions to Myself.

I awoke from my dream, and I knew that these two men with whom my spirit had conversed were worlds apart. Then I perceived that the real and only line of difference, like a chalk-line through the world, is a man's *faith*. We may divide the world into what classes we will, rich and poor, wise and simple, ancient and modern ; but now I know that there are only two great classes—those who know Christmas and a Cross, and those who do not !

And I asked myself these questions, with a new meaning in my heart :—

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What do we owe to that Christmas Child who came bringing the knowledge of God and life to our needy hearts ?

What would this world be, in its deepest perplexities, without the hope and the faith of Jesus, who has shown us that we are the sons of God's love ?

And what can I say for myself, as I think of the Light of His truth, except this—" And O the difference to me ! "

THE NAME WONDERFUL

By J. GOLDER BURNS, B.D.

Glasgow.

“ And His Name shall be called Wonderful.”

—Isaiah ix. 6.

The Name Wonderful

JESUS has been the centre of the world's thought for nineteen hundred years, and He is as truly an object of wonder to-day as He was to the first impressive group that gathered round the Holy Family, and bent forward open-eyed to look upon Him nestling in His mother's bosom. During all these Christian centuries there has not been a single faithful follower in any department of the business of the Kingdom, who has ever ceased to wonder at Jesus. He may have wearied, for a space, of his work ; he may have found himself asking whether the never-ending service was worth while ; the apparently meagre fruition from his labours may even have induced in him a spirit of rebelliousness ; in the course of his life many theories, points of view and lines of action formerly cherished may have been abandoned as of little account, until to the outward eye he seemed no longer the manner of man he had been ; but his sense of wonder at Jesus has ever survived all these fluctuations, and, if temporarily stayed, has but returned to hold him with greater ascendancy.

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“ Wonders will never cease ” is a colloquialism that is true in life universally. It is true pre-eminently of Jesus. To most people the Christian life consists of prayer and study of the mind of the Master, the Church with its worship, work and sacraments, and the honest endeavour to do the will of Christ in the vocation which they follow. It is not surprising that a feeling of dissatisfaction, and even of discouragement, sometimes supervenes. But it is a general experience that when the vault of heaven is at its darkest a ray of light pierces the gloom, at first little more than the tiniest pin-point, but soon growing in steadiness and power until it focusses the attention like a fixed star, and that star is just the “ Wonderfulness of Jesus.”

Let us then, this Christmas season, dwell for a little on “The Name Wonderful,” selecting from the many volumes in which it may be studied the Book of the Gospels, the Book of History and the Book of Personal Experience.

1. One fact appears in response to even a cursory examination of the Gospel records, which is, that wherever Jesus appeared He impressed. Sometimes the response was hostility, sometimes impatience, often it was shame and penitence, always it was a challenge to the conscience of befogged formalism and easy-going carelessness,

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and in many an instance His appeal kindled the flame of a life-long devotion. But if there is one word which applies to every case—the conscience-stricken, the penitent, the admiring, the aspiring, the critical and the hostile alike—that word is “wonder.” Again and again it may be read that “they marvelled at Him.” From the shepherds at the manger to the centurion at the Cross, everyone who came into contact with Him was not merely interested, intrigued, or arrested, but was stirred by a dominating sense of wonder. “What manner of man is this?” was a question constantly on their lips. “Who is this?” was the exclamation that arose from the Holy City as from one man, that day He entered. The like of this had never been witnessed. They wondered at His speech. Many things the world heard from Him for the first time, and what was not actually new was restated with an emphasis that was altogether original. They wondered at His deportment and attitude. Here was One Who looked at things from a new angle, and Whose actions contravened the conventions and categories which had hitherto been accepted without demur. They wondered most of all at the Man Himself, His character and personality. A phenomenon had appeared on the earthly stage. Here was One Who not merely taught a new kind

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of "goodness," but was that "Goodness" Himself. Patience and intolerance, love and hatred, the weakness of a woman and the might of a hero, magnanimity, gentleness, love of life, sweetness and beauty, energy, repose, laughter and tears, all were included. "What manner of man is this?" Do we wonder that they wondered?

Yes, these were wonderful years. If the Gospels tell us anything, and suggest anything to the devout imagination, it is that during His ministry His companions went about with Him in open-eyed amazement. There were no two days alike. They were walking on air. They pilgrimed in an enchanted land. They never knew what He would do next. The atmosphere was electrical with all manners of possibilities. From a situation in which they found themselves He always emerged by a way which they would never have guessed. When, in their dealings with people, they would have been indulgent, He was severe, and when they thought to do right by being censorious, He was personified love. He was a constant enigma to them. A thousand times He left them puzzled. Till the very end He was an unplumbed mystery. And yet they never felt in this the slightest inconsistency, never a shadow of incongruity. Thinking of it afterwards they admitted in their hearts that every day and in every

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way He was just what He ought to have been, and not many days of that ministry were required in order that they should be bound to Him in indissoluble ties. Is it to be wondered at that, when the crucial question arose, as sooner or later it was bound to arise—"Who is this wonder-Person?"—it could be answered in only one way adequately?

2. The same story is told in the larger Book of History, the same record of sustained wonder. All through these nineteen hundred years men have not ceased to wonder at Jesus, and to subscribe to the name which Isaiah, by anticipation, gave Him. Nor is this surprising. What changes these centuries have witnessed—wars, reformations, revolutions, world-shaking cataclysms! Dynasties have arisen, and, their brief life ended, have passed away. Great empires have been built up, and, as the centre of power has shifted, have crumbled. The treasures of the world have been steadily augmented, and to man's untiring intellect the universe has yielded up many of its secrets. The earth has been explored to almost every corner, and the forces of Nature have been summoned from their hiding-places to do man's bidding. A newer, softer spirit has been breathed into the higher civilizations, and many projects for mankind's benefit have been framed, have swept

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away opposition, and have been carried into effect. And yet it is the bare truth to say that over all the bewildering complexity of these nineteen centuries, above the storm as above the calm, one Figure presides in serene, majestic isolation—not a king, a philosopher, a poet, a statesman, a financier, a trader, or a war-lord, but Jesus, He who began His earthly career as the Babe of Bethlehem, and Whose pierced hand has directed the currents of the centuries and commands the ages for evermore.

You are sceptical about it? Very well. Take the events of the first thirty years of this era as recorded in the Gospels. Do they, or do they not, contribute an important factor in determining the course of subsequent history? "If Christ had not come"—there is a theme for a thrilling Christmas sermon! If Christ had not come, would literature have been quite the same? Think it well out—literature. Or architecture, or music, or painting, or education, or the theory and art of government, or the whole round of life, or even men and women, would these—would anything have been quite the same? To state the question is to answer it. From even imagining the awful alternative we recoil in horror. Towering above the ages, He has exerted an all-pervading influence. At the council board of kings,

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in the chambers where far-reaching decisions have been taken, behind the reformer's zeal, in the mind of thinker and artist, explorer, discoverer and inventor, on the plains where resounding battles have been lost and won, everywhere throughout these spaces of history, Jesus the Wonderful, Whose presence men admit although His Personality they cannot understand, answers the roll-call with an affirmative "I am here."

The fact is that there is not a single page of history on which, if we look long enough, He is not to be found. Paul wrote of the pre-Christian ages that the whole creation had been groaning and travailing in pain, and the only key to the complex mystery of these early times was that, however puzzling the succeeding events and phases may have appeared to the various actors in the drama, the stage was all the time in process of being set for the coming of Jesus. It is a noble theory. But with equal force it may be asserted that Jesus is the only key to the past nineteen centuries. The person who takes his stand on the vantage ground of the present and peers back into the receding shadows of the past, until his wet and wearied eyes give up the quest, need not despair. Jesus is the key. Nothing happens by chance. There is an end in view. In ways we cannot understand everything has been making, is

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making, its contribution to the time when His will shall be done on earth. "He is in the world subduing it unto Himself." Is the wonder of Jesus lessened or increased when we follow His personality across the pages of this open book? Is it a thing to be marvelled at that many of the most illustrious representatives of the human race, with few, if any, pretensions to a place among His disciples, desirous rather to preserve an appearance of neutrality, have been among the first to accord Him the supreme place?

3. Our divisions are not strictly delimited. The Book of the Gospels is a section of the Book of History, and both are pages from the Book of Experience. But it is the Book of personal religious experience which I have in view, and I make no apology for the climactic statement that it is in this volume that Jesus appears most wonderful of all.

Knowledge is of various types, but the highest is that which is built up on personal experience. Religion is in a sense knowledge, and, needless to say, it lays down personal experience as an absolute condition. In other words, a man may have a very fair knowledge of Jesus as He appears in the Book of the Gospels, and a more than fair acquaintance with Jesus as He is met on every page of the Book of History, and yet be without

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that knowledge of Jesus that alone matters. The indispensable condition of being sealed to the brotherhood is that a man know Jesus at first hand. He is to "say these things of himself, not because another hath told it concerning him." Against this law annoyance and stormy protest are of not the slightest avail. The Faith is reached by one road only, that of personal experience, and such experience always implies an attitude of devotion on the part of the soul to its Lord.

When this happy relationship has been set up the Christian life begins, and a book is gradually compiled in which the wonder of Jesus breaks out in a great and ever greater blaze of glory. In this precious book we have all that Jesus was in the Book of the Gospels and in the Book of History. But there is much besides. How wonderful, for one thing, Jesus is in what He does for the Christian! This has been the never-failing theme of our best-loved hymn writers, and perhaps the last word on the matter was uttered by St. Paul when he summed it up as "The love of Christ which passeth knowledge." To him it was the "wonder of wonders." It is no exaggeration to say that it is the personal experience of every Christian man and woman that there is not a single need of the human heart that Jesus is not prepared, and is not adequate,

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to meet. How wonderful Jesus is in the way in which He opens the door to everyone ! Many a master mind has made a bid for leadership in the intellectual and spiritual domain, but as often as not all but the wise and the rich, the strong and the gifted, have been warned away. Jesus dispenses with all the ordinary demands and conditions. He asks only one question—He does not even ask it, He lets man ask it of himself—whether the heart is attracted by His loveableness. And just because the heart in its deepest needs is universally the same, wealth and poverty, learning and ignorance, power and weakness, position and obscurity, enter hand in hand.

How wonderful Jesus is in the way in which He keeps hold of the heart that has once loved Him ! Other interests receive the attention, and sooner or later pass as if they had never been. Other personalities may receive even a measure of hero-worship, but the spell breaks, and we awaken to ask ourselves by what strange possibility it ever existed. Jesus, once loved, never lets go His hold.

How wonderful He is in the progressive revelation of Himself to those who company with Him ! There are people one meets for a chance half-hour, and in that brief space you seem to have learned all there is to be known about them.

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They are like the isolated hillock, which you locate, and measure, and walk around, and over, and afterwards, there being nothing more left to explore, you go on to the next. But Jesus in the myriad features of His personality, as unfolded in the experience of the Christian, resembles a great mountain range. At the beginning of his adventure the disciple is merely among the foot-hills, but as he steadily follows the ascending pathway of obedience and service, one mighty mountain mass lifts itself above another, and I would fain believe that even if the upward road continued throughout eternity there would always be peaks beyond ! That explains why there are so many portraits of Jesus. The devout artist is but setting forth the aspect of Our Lord which has become visible and impressive to him, at the point of the journey at which he has arrived. To the youth entering on his novitiate He reveals Himself in one phase, to the saint who has known Him long in another, but to both He is a never-failing source of wonder. At four-score years the Christian is still surprising himself with new discoveries in Jesus.

And to think that in order to keep His place permanently as the world's supreme wonder, Jesus has required nothing to be added or superimposed, no reinforcement, no " new features "

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of any kind ! He is the same. In his poor wisdom man has made many additions until it is sometimes difficult to recognize the Jesus of the sects and the Jesus of the Gospels as one and the same Person. But all this is as needless as it is useless. The Jesus of Peter, James and John has sufficed, and shall suffice, to fulfil Isaiah's prophecy.

" His name shall be called Wonderful." Are we not grateful to the prophet that, when sheer inability to enumerate and describe the qualities of his Dream-man cast him back on general terms, he gave play to his emotions and set down this alluring word ? It was a confession of failure on his part. He had done his best to describe the figure seen in his vision and he had despaired of his best, and so he summed it all up in a general description. We thank God for it. Jesus has many names, and every name a lode-star, but this is the best of all, for it is not a name but merely a suggestion, the effulgence that all the others radiate.

There is comfort in the word. We look at Jesus, and although always spell-bound, we are sometimes non-plussed, mystified. We know now that it is all in the plan, that it was never intended that we should fully understand our Lord. If we understood Him, He would cease to be wonderful, and if He were no longer wonderful, He would

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not be "He that should come," and we would "look for another."

There is salvation in the word. These are days when all the artificial buttresses of the Faith are crumbling. And woe betide the man who has been depending on them! But if you would be safe, here is the central pillar of the edifice, here is the link that will not snap, the anchor that will not drag, the fort that no assault can ever overwhelm, the Wonderfulness of Jesus! Renew your sense of wonder at the manger this Christmas Day, follow Him with the apostles, travel with Him down the centuries, behold Him in the pages of your own experience, cast your gaze over the intervening spaces towards that time when He shall be All in All. Never are you more truly a Christian than when "Lost in wonder, love and praise."

THE TWO CENSUS BOOKS

By H. C. CARTER, M.A.

Cambridge.

“ There went out a decree from Cæsar Augustus, that all the world should be enrolled.”—Luke ii. 1.

“ They which are written in the Lamb’s book of life.”
Rev. xxi. 27.

The Two Census Books

THESE two texts bring before our mind two Census books. I want you to consider what we may learn from thinking of them.

One of them stands at the very beginning of the Gospel. We are introduced to it in the Christmas story which tells us of the birth of Jesus. Cæsar Augustus, Tiberius Cæsar, second in order of the Emperors of Rome, decided to make a census of the inhabitants of all his provinces. The people were to report themselves in their own native places—at any rate, so far as the Jews of Palestine were concerned. The purpose of the census was probably that the people might be registered, to be assessed for taxation. Joseph, being a native of Bethlehem, went for enrolment there, with Mary, his wife. There, immediately after their arrival, Jesus was born. He must have been entered on the census. That was the first book in which the name of Jesus Christ was written—the Name that is now above every name.

The other census book stands at the end of the

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Gospel. It is a book written in Heaven. Jesus' name is inscribed on the outside of this book. He has many names that go to make up that name above every name. He is Jesus, the Saviour ; He is Christ, the Anointed King ; He is the Good Shepherd ; He is the Light of the World ; He is the Bright and Morning Star. But on this book, where His name is written to show that He is the owner of it, the name is written that speaks the most wonderfully of all those He bears of His gentleness and readiness to suffer—the Lamb of God. It is “the Lamb's” book of life. As in Cæsar's book, the names of all who are alive are written there. It is His book of Life.

I

Think of this, then, first: the Gospel *begins* with the name of Jesus Christ being written among the people living in the world—written there almost as soon as He was born. Strange and wonderful discoveries of old eastern documents—many of them much older than the time of Christ—have been made before this. I wonder if it is possible that some day there might be discovered the page of that book in which Joseph's and Mary's name and Jesus' are entered, that Cæsar might know how many subjects he had in Bethlehem. Probably it was not made of any

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parchment durable enough to survive long, and ages ago it was lost, or perished. But there it was, written among the facts of the world's history: Jesus, male child born to Mary, wife of Joseph, at Bethlehem. Did she record that He was born in a stable because there had been no room for them in the crowded inn? But there it was written. It reminds us that the Gospel of Jesus Christ began in an event of history that could take its place among the world's records of fact. We date our years from that fact. Every time we write a letter or enter a payment in a ledger, we testify that a change came for the world when Jesus was born. Human history began again then. The years before did not count; so men felt who had come to know what the birth of Jesus meant for the world. It was the greatest event in human history—the birth of Jesus. Have you ever tried to think how different our lives would have been if Jesus had not been born—if that event which could be written down as a fact in Cæsar's census book had not happened? We cannot think of it. We only know that there is hardly anything of all that we reckon most precious in our lives that we cannot trace back to that fact. It has made our homes what they have been in purity and tenderness; it has given us all that is strongest and sweetest in the influences

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that have been round our lives from babyhood. All our best thoughts of God, all our hopes of Heaven have come from that. Most of our consolations in this world, and our visions of a better world beyond this, have their origin there. The cradle of Jesus has proved to be the cradle of the world's true hopes and joys. All that is best for man began when Jesus was born.

And the other book is at the *end* of the Gospel. "They that are written in the Lamb's book of life." What is the end of it all? What is the purpose that is being worked out among us and in us, in all this drama of human life in which we play our parts? If the wonderful things written in this New Testament are true, the end of it is that a people is to be gathered home to God, in which we may have our part; a people whose names can be written down as those who are alive. Alive, after what we call death is done with, looked back upon as one of the incidents of the past. And it is "the Lamb's book of life." The secret of life has been given them by Jesus, the Lamb of God. They are His people, their life is owing to Him and owed to Him. It will not do only to look backward to discover what Christianity means. What is a Christian? There are two ways of telling that story, of answering that question—both have to go together to make up the true answer.

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A Christian is one who has come under the influence of that past fact that Jesus Christ came into the world : one whose life has been changed, as all our lives have been changed, changed in many ways from misery to happiness, because Jesus Christ came into the world. Millions of people are outside Christianity still—they have never come under the advantages of that healing change. And it is the more disgrace to us who have come under them. We care so little. They are still in darkness and the shadow of death. They do not know the Fatherhood of God. We do not realize how dark the world is where Christ has not come to be known. You and I have been Christians all our lives in this first sense. The truth and benefits of Christianity have wrapped our lives round from the beginning. But all this, all the difference that it makes—that it has made to us—to have been born and brought up in a Christian land, that is all the work of the past upon us, something given to us from outside. And in the end we may be none the better for it. What is a Christian ? There must be another answer that looks forward to the end. Shall we *live* then ? At the end stands that book of life—the life that has been saved to endure by Christ, the Lamb of God. Will our names be in that book ? Shall we live with Him ?

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II

But now, you will say, I am playing with the notion of these two census books in an unjustifiable way. There is no real parallel between them. The one was an actual book spoken of in a record of actual history; the other is only spoken of by a figure, a piece of imagery, in a book of visions and imagination. Yes, and I want you to think about that difference between the two books. The one was an actual book—written with ink that you could see, on paper you could handle—that book of Tiberius Cæsar's. When it was written, it was sent up by the registrar in Bethlehem to Cæsarea, or wherever the Palestine headquarters was, and then posted with other books to Antioch perhaps, the chief city of the province of Syria (to which Palestine belonged) and then perhaps to Rome, to be kept among the imperial archives. It was an actual thing. Yes, and being actual it was temporary. How long do you suppose it was of any use, or of the slightest interest to anybody? That census would be no use after a generation or so had passed. They would need to make another. And it would be a wonder if after a century the papers were even preserved—they would soon be lumber, quite worthless.

The other book is not an actual book—no, it

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is a book which is a spiritual fact, that could only be spoken of by a picture borrowed from material things. "The Lamb's book of life." There was no paper or ink that that book was ever made of, except in the Apostle's vision. It is an imaginary book.

But which of the two books do you think really endures the longer—which of the two needs more to be reckoned with now, or will need to be reckoned with in ages to come? The spiritual fact is much more enduring than the material. The book that could only be spoken of in picture, which no eye could ever look upon, is much more real than the other which was the tangible record of Cæsar's great dominions. "The things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal."

Cæsar's census book has perished; "the Lamb's book of life" remains. It was an accident of time and circumstance that decided whose names were written in that book of Cæsar's; just those who happened to be living on the earth, within the lands of the Roman Empire, when it was compiled. How much does that really matter when the whole of human history is viewed? But it is no accident that decides whose names are written in that other unseen book. It is the book of eternal destiny. It is

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the book of human character. Not time or circumstance determines that. Those whose names Christ writes there are written there for ever. That book will remain for men and angels to read for all eternity.

It reminds us how little the things of this world matter in themselves. They matter only as they lead on to the things above and beyond this world. All the entries of our life on earth will soon be forgotten in this world's reckoning. Every paper that bears our name, unless we are among the few famous ones of the earth, will soon be destroyed past all recovery. The inscriptions on our tombstones will not be kept fresh and clear to read very long. The things that are seen are temporal. But there *is* an entry that will not perish. Will our name be written there?

III

But now think of one other thing of which these two census books remind us. Whose are they? Cæsar's, and Christ's. The one belonged to Cæsar ; the other belongs to Christ.

The name of Jesus was written in Cæsar's book. He was entered as one of Cæsar's subjects. All whose names were there belonged to Cæsar,—so he reckoned. Is Cæsar's name written in Christ's book—in "the Lamb's book of life?" We do not

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know. But which thing matters most? Was it an honour for Jesus to be written down among the subjects of Tiberius? Or do we think it was an honour for Tiberius, had he known it, to have Jesus' name there? There can be no doubt about our answer to that. And if Tiberius' name is not in Jesus' book, which is it the worse for, Jesus or Cæsar? Does it not make us feel, as we think of it, how shallow and trumpery the world's judgments are? For Cæsar seemed to be the great king, and Jesus—what did He seem then, and for so long as Tiberius lived? A despised member of a despised race; one whom even that race despised, and hated so that they got Cæsar's deputy to make away with Him. Yet He is on the throne, and it is before Him that Cæsar's claims come to be tested.

Would *we* rather be written down in Cæsar's book or in Christ's? Cæsar's books are still being compiled—the books of the powers of this world: census books, books of honour, books of privilege, books of fame. Would we rather be written down in *them*, or in “the Lamb's book of life?” Would we rather be written a patriotic citizen of the British Empire or a faithful Christian? We may have to choose between them. Would we rather be written a successful man or woman, or a true follower of Jesus? We may

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have to choose between them. Which counts more with us, to win the world's "well done," or Christ's? We may have to choose one and abandon the other.

Jesus Christ's is the only book of *life*. "Thou hast a name that thou livest and art dead"—those are awful words, but they must be spoken to us, if we get the world's reward, but reject the following of Jesus. Jesus Christ's is the only book of life. The only real life comes through living in the power of *His* life, which is the power of love.

We are keeping Christmas again. And as it comes, with its wonderful message, so incredible to the world's judgment—still, for all the easy professions of belief in it—the message that in that baby born in the Bethlehem stable, and in that carpenter of Nazareth, and in that nameless Galilean preacher, and in that man suffering as a common criminal upon the Cross, tricked and hunted to death by religious men with a crowd to help them with their fickle shouting, was the incarnate God, whose love, shown in all that life of sorrow and that death of shame, redeems the world—it comes with a great call to us, putting before us a new opportunity, to choose which way shall be ours : to go with Him by faith, or to go with the world.

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Faith in Him is conquest—spiritual conquest. There is a greater war to win than any that is waged on earthly battlefields, the war against our unbelief : we each have to fight it out on the battlefield of our hearts.

Let me, as I close, read to you from the *Pilgrim's Progress*—a book whose truth does not wear out :

“ I saw also that the Interpreter took Christian again by the hand and led him into a pleasant place, where was builded a stately palace, beautiful to behold ; at the sight of which Christian was greatly delighted ; he saw also upon the top thereof certain persons walked who were clothed all in gold. Then said Christian, may we go in thither ? Then the interpreter took him and led him up toward the door of the palace ; and behold at the door stood a great company of men, as desirous to go in, but durst not. There also sat a man at a little distance from the door, at a table side, with a book and his inkhorn before him, to take the name of him that should enter therein : he saw also that in the doorway stood many men in armour to keep it, being resolved to do the man that would enter what hurt and mischief they could. Now was Christian somewhat in a muse : at last when every man started back for fear of the armed men, Christian saw a man of a very

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stout countenance come up to the man that sat there to write, saying, ' *Set down my name, Sir* ' ; the which, when he had done, he saw the man draw his sword and put an helmet on his head and rush toward the door upon the armed men, who laid upon him with deadly force ; but the man not at all discouraged, fell to cutting and hacking most fiercely ; so after he had received and given many wounds to those that attempted to keep him out, he cut his way through them all, and pressed forward into the palace, at which there was a pleasant voice heard from those that were therein, even of the Three that walked upon the top of the palace :—

*Come in, Come in,
Eternal Glory thou shalt win.*

So he went in and was clothed with such garments as they. Then Christian smiled and said, ' I think verily I know the meaning of this.' "

I wonder, do *we* know the meaning of it ?

THE PEOPLE WHO GREETED
THE INFANT JESUS

By R. C. GILLIE, M.A., D.C.L.
Marylebone.

“ And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.”—Luke ii. 8.

“ Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judæa in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem.”—Matt. ii. 1.

“ And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon ; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel.”

—Luke ii. 25.

The People Who Greeted the Infant Jesus

THERE was a poor welcome for the Christ child, but it is a mistake to say there was none. There were a few watchers for the dawn, and there were others who, though unexpectant, were ready to greet Him when the tidings of His birth came. Those who "waited for the consolation of Israel" were on the watch-tower in the temple at Jerusalem; the star-gazers of Chaldea were scanning the skies for some token of hope, and the Shepherds of Bethlehem, these sentinels of the night, startled by the great news in the midst of ordinary service, hastened to the babe in the manger.

It is noteworthy that the three groups who gathered round the infant Christ each represented a different class and a different type of mankind. To each group a differing token of the new Presence was granted.

The Shepherds represent the toilers of earth, men who work with their hands and have most to do with the physical side of life. To them was given the sign most readily recognized—the angels' glory and the angels' song. It was a

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sign to eye and ear and mind, impossible to mistake.

The "wise men" represent the students of the world, the observers and thinkers. To them was granted a sign which was discernible by the eye, but required interpretation by the mind.

Thirdly, the group of aged, pious people; the little circle within a circle with the temple as their centre, represent the devout and discerning of spirit: for them there was no sign save an inward token, a spiritual assurance.

I

Romance has gathered round the figure of the Shepherd in the New Testament, especially because Our Lord pictured Himself under this form as the great protective personality. It requires an effort to disrobe these watchers of the flock at Bethlehem of unreal glamour. But we miss something of truth unless we remember that this first Christmas night began just as hundreds of other nights had begun, and the Shepherds were busy with their ordinary occupation just as usual. They were simple people, with few opportunities of knowledge. That night we may presume that while they kept guard they were talking about their sheep and their prospects at market, and their homes and children.

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There is no sign that they were seekers after some new revelation of God. They were not on the alert, scanning the midnight skies for a coming One, or praying that a great hour of unveiling of Deity might be hastened. They were ordinary people about their ordinary tasks.

That is one of the wonderful things about spiritual blessedness. Its offers invade men who are not seekers. Jesus Himself went out of His way to make that plain. When He taught the inestimable value of the heavenly treasure, He did an unusual thing. He duplicated the parable to make this plain. The merchant who gained the pearl of great price had been on the quest for years, but the discoverer of the hid treasure was not a professed treasure-seeker. He just happened on it. Our Lord taught that the great opportunity may come to those who are not seekers. The Shepherds were of that company.

But they were people of the right stamp—humble, biddable, unsophisticated, ready to believe and ready to take trouble to test their belief. Just as the treasure-seeker sold all, so they were prepared to do what was needful. They left their flocks, and hurried to seek the Child. They accepted the token of God's unexpected and special presence.

There is something akin between the Gospel

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and the worker. Jesus chose His comrades from among fishermen, men of toil; and it was shepherds who were the favoured ones of earth on the first Christmas Day. In the path of honest labour there is a place where God can speak to man. There is nothing artificial about the normal life of a working-man, no invitation to idleness or fastidiousness. He is honestly hungry, rightfully weary, helping to get the work of the world done. Such are the people to whom Christ can make His appeal.

Are the working people of this land divorced from religion? That statement is sometimes made, but it is not true of the country as a whole, and only partially true of half-pagan London. In our factory and mining districts, in our large cities and the quiet country places, the churches would be almost empty were there no working-folk there. But if any church does not offer welcome to the worker and speak to his heart—then that church is deeply in fault. The first tidings of Christ's coming was given to working-folk.

And if the workers suffer themselves to be severed from Christ, they are going against nature. Jesus Christ and the worker are meant for each other. His first appeal was to them, and the angels sang their herald song to them. Oh,

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workers of England, know your Lord ! He is your true friend.

II

The second group who hailed our Lord's coming were the "Wise men of the East." Who were they ? Little we know of them, but this is clear : they were students who were also seekers. These were men on the alert, searching the skies and the records, inquiring for the truth of things in unfamiliar ways denied to many. They were investigators, the scientific men of the time, pondering the old, watching for the new.

They were also venturers, not only refusing the closed mind, but also willing to launch on a great quest. Imagination was their method as well as investigation. They were ready for any clue, wherever it might lead them. That is the picture of the higher scientific mind. At its best it is bold as well as cautious, awake to every token of the truth. Otherwise, radium and the X-ray and chloroform would not have been added to men's possessions. Routine scientists abound. But the best are seekers who are prepared to make ventures.

It is also to be noticed that these student-venturers did not shut out the possibility of the advent of a great Personality who would succour

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the world. They studied the stars, but they were prepared to go to welcome a man who was a King. They were wistful, not proud. Their knowledge did not forbid enrichment through faith. And they themselves had the princely heart. When they went on their long journey, they prepared and took gifts with them, and did not hesitate to bestow their gifts at a lowly child's cradle.

Men say that the thinkers have deserted the Church. It has never been completely true. It is not true to-day. Pascal and Pasteur, Clerk Maxwell and Lord Kelvin, all died in the faith which is celebrated on Christmas Day. But the Church has often failed to welcome the "wise men" and has doubted their gifts. This is one of its heavy shames. It has been afraid of knowledge, faint-hearted about truth. It has shrunk from the new unfolding of the wonders of God's earth and sky. The Church has the right to refuse to be stampeded. All that professes to be discovery is not truth. But the Church must unfailingly believe that all truth is one as God is one. The open mind must be maintained on all questions concerning which there is no unmistakable revelation from God. There must be a welcome for the thinkers as well as for the toilers.

What is the Christian message to the thinkers

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to-day? Not that they think too much, but that the sphere of their thought is too limited. Not that they are too ardent in their quest for truth, but that their range is too restricted. With all your seeking, the Church cries, miss not the star that will lead you on the diviner quest: the guiding light which will give you the clue to life and lead you to the Lord of life.

But it is useless to go on the quest unless you are prepared to be humble, to find the greatest of all at once hidden and revealed in a human life; to bring yourselves and your gifts to His feet. It is written: "They fell down and worshipped Him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto Him gifts."

It was harder for the wise men to come than for the shepherds. They had a less obvious sign to descry, a longer journey to take, and a more difficult inquiry to make. But they brought more. The shepherds had to come empty-handed. The wise men brought their rare and costly gifts: "gold, frankincense and myrrh." It is still the same. It is harder for the thinker to find the Christ, but when he comes he has more to bring.

III

There was a third group to greet the infant Jesus. It consisted of those aged, devout people,

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deeply religious and with a special quality in their faith. They "waited for the consolation of Israel," they "looked for the redemption of Jerusalem." Simeon and Anna were the elect of the nation. God had whispered in their ear. They knew a great deliverer was at hand. Other Jews were excited at the thought of the possibility of a Messiah. They knew.

One ponders, then. They were the people with the unconquerable hope, though so old. Their expectation came wholly from the Unseen. Their whole life was devotion, prayer, and yet more prayer. Removed from earth's toils and struggles, half in heaven already, they had developed a rare spiritual sensitiveness, an unshakeable religious certainty.

Therefore they were able to recognize the Expected One without a sign. There appeared before them a Jewish artisan and his wife and a babe, a truly human babe. We may imagine unusual beauty in the mother and the child, and be justified in our imagination; but beauty was not the sign. There was that in these holy ancients which gave them the power to recognize a Saviour. They were the "confidants of God." A humble coming, an entirely normal human

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life, did not mislead them, though it might mislead their contemporaries.

They all were looking for a King
To slay their foes and lift them high.
Thou cam'st a little baby thing
That made a woman cry.

No, not "*all* were looking for a King." God has His chosen ones, a special seed-plot of piety. They needed neither star nor angel to find their Lord. Their hearts knew when He was present by the fire that leapt to flame within.

Their successors are still among us. These are people with simple hearts, often unknown to fame, whose chief interest is God and God's ways with men. They have the forward look, for much intercourse with God creates expectancy. To them Christ is akin, and they bear witness to what Christ is to be to mankind. They keep open the doors whereby God can communicate with men, help us to believe in the Unseen, and give us spiritual courage. Wise, very wise, they are with the wisdom of the child's heart and the mature mind.

They cannot argue for their faith, but their testimony is unimpeachable and carries a rare power of conviction with it. Blessed the Church which possesses such saints who are also watchers for the dawn.

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IV

Where can Jesus Christ look for new welcomes to-day? He is ever seeking to enter the heart of man and to be born anew within each human soul. Not to one kind of experience or to one type of life does He offer Himself, but to all men. To the man of toil, the man of thought, and the man of prayer, He comes and brings with Him what each man needs.

The toiler may say: "I have no time to investigate, and much is uncertain," but our Lord suits His signs and tokens to our need. Where there is an honest and wistful heart, His message can come as certainly as the angel-message from the skies. But there is a journey of the spirit to be taken before certainty is possible. Will the toiler say: "Let us go now even unto Bethlehem"?

The thinker may find Christ approach him in another way. He may say to himself: "I cannot easily pray: I must ponder, study, investigate. I am staggered by this assertion that God became man. It is too great to be easily believed." But is there no star to lead you, no manifestation in your mind to guide you on the way? What if it be true that "God grew likest God in being born?" Are your eyes towards the sky?

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The naturally Christian for whom prayer is no effort but a delight, they too can give the added welcome on this Christmas Day. Not for your lips complaints and repinings, because of the blessed past; but the steady testimony; "Christ still comes to men. Silently, surely, He enters in. We know."

May Our Lord have them all round Him to-day, men of every type and taste, brought by such diverse ways to the great discovery.

NO ROOM

By NORMAN MACLEAN, D.D.

Edinburgh.

“And Mary brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger ; because there was no room for them in the inn.”—Luke ii. 7.

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It was not really because there was no room that the Holy Mother was shut out from the mean inn nineteen centuries ago, for, had they wished, the folk that filled its court with gossip and revelry could so easily have made room. It is difficult for us to enter into the minds of people who would have no compassion on a woman in the hour of her direst need. That is because centuries of Christianity have softened our hearts and opened our eyes to the glory and loveliness of childhood. This little verse which St. Luke added to his gospel, as an author to-day adds a footnote to a page, to explain why Jesus was born in a manger, visualizes for us the mighty revolution this Child has wrought. Before He was laid in that manger woman was a mere chattel and children were disregarded ; to-day, because the Mother held the hope of the world in her arms there in the stall, womanhood is everywhere honoured, and childhood most precious. It was because the world knew not yet the spirit of love and compassion, because its heart was not yet

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touched with pity for the outcast, that Mary and Joseph were shut out from the inn. There is an old Celtic proverb that says : " Where there is heart-room there also is house-room." The true reason why the Child was born in the grotto where the asses were stalled was that there was no heart-room that night in Bethlehem.

I

There is no footnote in all literature that so stirs the mind with a wistful poignancy as this of St. Luke's. It leaps out of the page arrestingly. The world, at heart, has not really changed so very much in these two thousand years. Human nature is very much the same. We can be quite certain that had Joseph been able to show that inn-keeper a fat wallet stuffed with money there would have been room enough made for the Mother and the Child. It was because they were so desperately poor and so shabby that they were shut out. If they only had money ! That was an era when Mammon held high sway over the hearts of men. And the devotees of that poor god have multiplied in our day.

The wonderful thing that Christmas does for us every year is this : it summons us to go on pilgrimage, and there in the stable to realize what a poor, tawdry god this Mammon is. The devotees

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of Mammon had no welcome for the most beautiful thing in all the world's history. And all the life of this Jesus was of the same pattern. Mammon had never a smile for Him. He knew what it was to wear patched garments, and to buy the cheapest of all food—two sparrows for a farthing. There is no record of His ever giving any money to anyone—He had none to give. His place, from the hour when there was no room found for Him among the respectably clad and the comfortably housed to the dark hour when a borrowed grave received His poor mangled body at the last, was with the disinherited. Out of conditions of dire poverty came the world's enrichment.

This poor god, Mammon, how difficult a thing it is to break loose from his sway. For all these centuries Christmas has been pouring the contempt of heaven upon him, and yet the cry of humanity is more than ever after their idol. The rich flaunt his worship in the sight of masses seething with discontent; and these aforetime silently-enduring people now demand their share in the largess of the god. Society may perish, but each must have his share! And what a god on whose altar to sacrifice a race! He can inspire not one noble thought, nor bestow on any starved heart the smallest gift of love. All he can bestow is food and clothes and shelter—

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and a tramp can command the same. And yet the world runs after this tawdry god. If it had not been for the yearly reminder of the meanness of this Mammon which shut the Child out of the inn, the world would have been a complete prey to his vulgarity.

This is a fact which Christendom might ponder with great advantage. It is the souls who have been cradled in poverty who become the deliverers of the world. A poor miner and his wife go to a fair and there, having found refuge in a hovel, their child, Martin Luther, was born. In all the world that day there could not have been any poorer or meaner than these—and yet the flame flickered there that was to illumine the world. Out of a ploughman's cot in Haddington came John Knox, who brought democracy to the birth in the hour in which Queen Mary asked him, "Who are you that presume to school the nobles and princes of this realm?" and he answered, "Madam, a subject born within the same." It was when following the plough that the spirit of inspiration found the prophet of human equality and brotherhood—Burns. In fact, it is almost always the same. Whether it be a Shakespeare, a Milton, a Bunyan, a St. Francis, or a Thomas à Kempis, it is the lives that have been freed from the thralldom of riches and from the enervation of

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luxury who have kindled the fires by whose light humanity has marched forward. It seems a strange thing, when one remembers these things, and when the heart goes back to Bethlehem and the eyes behold the Child against whom Mammon shut the door, that there should be anyone in this land to-day so blind as to bow the knee to so tawdry a god. And yet, the weird fact confronts us—that the devotees of Mammon have multiplied exceedingly of late. When the soul is oppressed by blatant vulgarity, let us go even unto Bethlehem and there behold the light which was destined to flame over the world revealing to the hearts of men the true riches. That is deliverance from bondage.

II

No words in the Gospels are more prophetic of the fate that overtook Christianity than these, which tell how Jesus was shut out from the inn at His birth. It was the same all through His life : He came to His own and His own received Him not. It has been the same all through the weary centuries. Even when they professed to receive Him, the generations of men have shut Jesus out.

We have but to think of the sad history of

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Christianity to realize how true that is. He proclaimed the most revolutionary truth ever preached to men—that slaves and sinners and folk ignorant of the law and, therefore, accursed, are all the sons of God ; and that the whole of man's duty lay in loving God and loving one another with a love red with sacrificial blood. In a world filled with hatred He proclaimed the love of one's enemy ; and His own life embodied what He declared. Breathing a prayer for His enemies, He dies. . . . Now, what have men done with this evangel of love ? It is no exaggeration to say that they have shut it out. It was too beautiful for their gross hearts. It was also very difficult, and demanded an enormous sacrifice. Before a man can love like that, he must be willing to be renewed in the whole man—willing to separate himself from sense and sin. And yet men wanted to have something of the radiance of this Jesus ; but they wanted it without the necessity of sacrifice. Jesus demanded the surrendered heart and the renewed life ; that was too much. So they devised a way of their own. They substituted the surrendered brain for the surrendered heart. They wrote down a record of the greatest event in history and what they remembered of the words spoken in Galilee and Jerusalem, and they formulated logical propositions setting forth

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that after this manner God acted ; and they said : “ Whosoever does not believe this without any doubt he shall perish everlastingly.” . . . One has only to listen to Jesus as He says : “ By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples if ye have love one to another,” and then turn to the formulas by which men have tested discipleship to realize that the strangest and most bewildering of all fates has overtaken Jesus. The generations that shouted His name as a war-cry shut the door against Himself. They shut Him out. They made a tradition out of His spirit and His life, and in the name of that tradition went on crucifying and slaying each other. The very passions which crucified Jesus they consecrated by His name. . . . What a history that has been in which a Borgia sits on the throne of St. Peter, in which Tetzels sell indulgences that the treasury of the Pope may be filled ; in which Christians cheerfully burned one another thinking they were doing God service. There is only one explanation and that is, that although His name was everywhere on men’s lips, yet He Himself found no room in their hearts. The generations have been at one in this—that they shut the door against Love. They made room for everything except for Him. Professing to do Him the greatest honour, they slammed the door in His face.

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And sometimes I wonder whether we have so very greatly improved. It is true that we no longer cheerfully burn each other with the name of the Lord of Love on our lips justifying the deed. We, however, do similar things in His name. I never read of the enthusiasm evoked by a great assemblage who adhere to the same definitions of the church and of the sacraments, without a queer sense of the littleness of man. It is the easiest thing in the world to stir masses of people into a red-hot enthusiasm for theories about Jesus and about the society He formed, but that enthusiasm is not for Jesus Himself. There is only one definition of a Christian found in the Bible : " If any man have not the spirit of Christ he is none of His." And the Spirit of Christ is the love of all men, the love that expresses itself in service to the utmost. It is the love that saves children ; that saves the lost. That red-hot enthusiasm for formulas is not the love that sacrifices everything to sweep temptation from the way of the miserable. It is a grim thought to think how hyphenated causes can evoke sacrifice for which the Lord Himself appeals in vain. One cannot escape the grim conclusion that the world is to-day in so parlous a state simply because in so large a measure the very Church which He founded has so seldom made room for her Lord.

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A church with Jesus shut out is the ugliest blot on the face of the world.

III

If in the Church there has often been found no room for Jesus, still less has there been found room for Him in the social order. At Christmas time when the hearts of all folk are made tender by the thought of the Child in the manger, it is natural to think of how the world treats the child. In its attitude to the child we can discern its attitude to Jesus ; for Jesus identifies Himself so closely with humanity that He declares that whosoever receives a little child in His name receives Himself. How, then, do we deal with Jesus as He comes to us in the form of a little child, saying " Receive Me " ? This is what we do. In our great cities two hundred out of a thousand babies perish in the first year of life. The conditions which produce that awful massacre are manifest to all beholders. In proportion to the number of premises licensed by the State in any locality is the death-rate among the babies. . . . Wars come to an end ; this slaughter of the innocents never ceases. And many justify these conditions in the very name of Jesus ; just as in other days they justified slavery in the name of Jesus by St. Paul sending Onesimus back to

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his master. If men are to be judged by what they tolerate even more than by what they do, then on this our day the judgment will go forth that in the organization of the body politic Jesus was shut out. There was no room found for Him who proclaimed the judgment of the rope and the stone on the generation who offended against little children.

It is not merely by this callous indifference to the conditions which work the perdition of childhood that we can discern the attitude of the social organization to Jesus, but more clearly still by the hostility manifested towards the very existence of the child. In another age Ruskin declared that there is no wealth but life ; to-day the social organization conspires to shut the door in the face of babies altogether. Property owners are now loth to let their houses to tenants with children. Even the coming of a baby has brought an ejectment warrant. The reward of bringing a baby into the world has often been being thrown into the streets. The revellers in the inn in Bethlehem have been the progenitors of a great host. Rents are with them the chief good, and not babies. . . . There are to-day shameless advertisements for gardeners and the like, with the words added, " No children." The most extraordinary advertisement of the kind I ever saw

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was in France in May, 1917, when a copy of the *Daily Chronicle* came into my hands, and in that spirit of utter weariness when the eyes glance even over advertisements, I read the words : " Chapel keepers, man and wife (no children), for large Congregational Church, central London ; must be total abstainers . . . 5 rooms, coal and light provided. . . ." That advertisement banished my weariness. I saw that great congregation hailing with rapture the coming of the Child ; the preacher with dewy eloquence depicting the callousness of the inn frequenters in Bethlehem—and their own servant, with five rooms, forbidden any room for a child. . . . Some ancient prophet spoke of Judgment beginning in the House of God. That was the sort of thing that must have been in his mind.

Never was childhood so precious as to-day when the race has to recover its dread loss. The fact, however, remains that the door is being shut by selfishness in the face of the child. With the classes, Bridge is more highly esteemed than babies. The race is being atrophied by self-indulgence. In our day neither John Wesley nor Walter Scott would have been born ! The generation which sacrifices the nursery to the garage is a generation which makes no room for Jesus in the midst. It shuts Him out.

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IV

The world's supreme need at this Christmas-tide is that room should be made for the Child. The world has come nigh to perishing because it has made room for everything except the one thing needful—that Love which came on Christmas Day. The need of the world is God, and nowhere can that need be satisfied save by the coming of the Child. Long years ago St. Chrysostom, speaking of the symbol of God in the Holy of Holies between the cherubim, said : “ The true Shekinah is Man.” And that saying is ever true. For there is no way by which love can manifest itself save through human hearts and hands and lips. Personality is the only means by which God could manifest the highest in Him, and in the fulness of the time the Child was born who was destined to reveal in a life of love that God is Love. Christmas is not the commemoration of an isolated fact ; it is the day of all days on which we are to realize that the coming of God to man in His Holy Spirit is a continuous process, and that we each of us on this day can become tabernacles for the indwelling of the Most High.

How shall we induce the world to cease shutting out the Child by whom God thus comes ? How

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shall we prevail upon men to make room for Christ in their lives ? It is, I think, by making the people realize as never before, how precious He is and how all-important that they should receive Him. The greatest and most valuable thing in all the world is goodness. Let any mother have the choice of her son becoming rich and successful and yet a rogue, or poor and good, and she will instantly choose poverty for him. It is the instinctive recognition of life's true values. The witness of nineteen centuries is that there is no power on earth that builds up men and women in unselfishness and goodness but the power that is radiated from Him whose life on earth began in a manger. However laden the ship, the captain will make room for gold. Iron ore and clay will be thrown overboard, if need be, to make room. And we must be ready to cast away our costly treasures that we may make room. Everywhere let us make room. In the cabinet of our statesmen that wile and craftiness may no longer desolate the earth with the millions slain—that the Prince of Peace may guard the frontiers of the world ; in our schools that a generation may grow up realizing that life's nobility does not consist in what we can get, but what we can give—that the glory of manhood is to serve ; in our workshops and our factories that duty, and not profit, may

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become the master-word of life. If we but knew where the true treasure of life lay, we would at this season open the doors of our hearts and say :
“ Come Lord Jesus ; abide with us for ever.”

v

The watchword of Christmas—*Sursum Corda*—rings once more in our ears. There is every reason why we should lift up our hearts. For nineteen centuries men have striven in many and devious ways to shut out Christ. They did so by contumely, by persecution, and by the more subtle way of changing a religion of spiritual renewal into one of mental gymnastics. The ways in which the door has been shut on Christ are innumerable—from the priest who changed love into ritual to the puritan who transformed the Sermon on the Mount into a thing of holy groans and pious snuffles—yet it has ever been impossible to shut Him wholly out. In the darkest days the Child found room in humble homes, and pious mothers in the eventide taught their children the wondrous story of how love came to earth, and how the Child that saved the world was born in a stable. There never has been a day for all these centuries but life has been beautified by Him and death conquered, for hosts no man can number. In all the years

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there never was a day when so many people went in heart and soul to Bethlehem with a great longing in their souls. "We have tried every way," they say, "and have found no deliverance ; let us try the way of Christ—let us make room for Him." And they are making room. They cannot but make room. For this Jesus cannot be shut out. He is now the Spirit of Divine Love brooding over men, and He comes in even through closed doors. There are no frontiers that can guard against the Spirit ; no locks that can shut Him out. That is how the world with all its wiles has not been able to destroy Christianity. The Child will conquer at the last. He makes room for Himself.

THE MOTHER OF OUR LORD

A Christmas Study

BY GEORGE H. MORRISON, D.D.

Glasgow.

*“Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is
with thee : blessed art thou among women.”*

Luke i. 28.

The Mother of Our Lord

AMONG all the influences of home there is none more powerful than that of motherhood. It is the moulding and inspiring force in tender and impressionable years. "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world." In that bold line there is a deal of truth. The mother's shadow falling across the cradle is a shadow of blessing or of woe. When the eyes are opening, when the heart is softest, when the little will is yet unformed—what a tremendous influence the mother wields. There comes a time with the advance of years when the impress of the father is determinative. The strength and masculine energy of fatherhood will be needed then to guide and to control. But in the opening days, when the child is but a babe—when life is fresh, and when the world is wonderful—it is the love of motherhood more than that of fatherhood that interprets and conveys the love of God.

Now, if that be so with every infant you may be certain it was so with Jesus. All that a mother ever meant for you, *that* His mother must have meant for Him. He was born of a woman—

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made under the law. Did you ever link these words together? Is not the first law we know in life the gentle and controlling law of motherhood? And so our Lord, who on the cross of Calvary fulfilled the eternal law of God for us, began by obedience to the law of motherhood. He was as helpless, He was as dependent, as any other little babe in Nazareth. He hung upon His mother's breast as really as afterwards He hung upon the Cross. And how He was moulded in these childish years by the love and sweetness and patience of His mother we shall never understand, in all its fullness, till we cast our crowns down at His feet. How could we better spend our Christmas Sunday, then, than by thinking for a little about Mary? It is thus that we can join the angel song, "Hail, thou that art highly favoured among women." What do we know of her, what can we learn of her, as we read the simple tale of the evangelist? It is on that I should like to speak.

I think the chief thing to impress us about Mary is just the obscurity in which she walks. The days and months and years go hurrying by, and of Mary there is scarce a trace. That our Lord had never ceased to love her tenderly we know from that memorable moment at the Cross. Amid the agonies of that last hour He saw her :

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“ Woman, behold thy son—behold thy mother.”

And yet, though He had never ceased to love her, and she had never ceased to love her son, she lives and moves and loves behind a veil. Is it not often so in human life? The things that are dearest are the hidden things. The hands that bless us and the hearts that pray for us are hands and hearts of which the world knows nothing. Happy the life with a background such as that, where there is someone always true and loving, someone whose influence is not less real because it is hidden from the prying eye. Wordsworth has written with infinite contempt of the man who would peep and botanize upon his mother's grave. And a mother's love is like a mother's grave—it is too sacred for the light of day. And that is why Mary in her perfect motherhood is never flaunted on the Gospel page, but moves behind a veil and in obscurity. When one thinks of the place that has been given to Mary in the worship of the Roman Catholic Church ; when one thinks of her exalted and conspicuous—the queen of heaven, the celestial rose—one feels that the charm of motherhood is gone. That public throne is not a mother's throne. That glittering crown is not a mother's crown. Motherhood on earth is not like that ; neither is perfected motherhood in heaven. All the splendour and

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show of mariolatry is not half so true to what we know of motherhood as is the sweet obscurity of Scripture.

And yet if we were to think that this obscurity were the penalty of lack of gifts or character—if we were to think of Mary as a characterless woman, we should be utterly untrue to Scripture. Mary was a woman of a very beautiful character, a woman of a most uncommon nature. There are people of whom you would never hear, though they had the ancestry of David ; people predestined to obscurity as others are predestined to renown. But whatever the virgin was she was not that—she was a woman of most uncommon gifts ; with all her quietness she had a strength of character which has got itself written upon the Gospel page. Think of the journey she took to see her cousin. It was a toilsome and a perilous journey. For a young betrothed maiden such as she was, it was a course of action without precedent. For a Jewish maiden when she was betrothed was not expected to go much abroad ; she was expected to stay modestly at home. Here was a woman, then, who had the gift of courage, and with the gift of courage she had the gift of song. Many a mother has the gift of song ; Mary had it in pre-eminence. Here was one of those rare and rounded natures that not only

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meet life's difficulties bravely, but set the difficulties of the day to music. Two things always impress me in our Lord: the one is His courage, the other is His poetry. Christ was unfalteringly brave, and yet He was a poet to His finger-tips. And it tells us how perfectly He was a human child, drawing His human life from her who bore Him, when these are the qualities we find in Mary. A woman who could act as Mary acted—a woman who could sing as Mary sang—had energy and gifts to make her famous had she any desire to be famous. But Mary had no desire to be famous. She did not want to be the queen of heaven. She wanted to be the mother and the queen of her little growing family at Nazareth.

Now a woman who could so obliterate herself must have been a woman of singular humility. And there are several traces in the narrative that confirm the humility of Mary. Think, for instance, of the Annunciation. There is a picture of the Annunciation, by Rossetti, which I suppose many of you have seen. In it Mary is cowering away, and there is a look of terror in her eyes. But the greatest painters, like Angelico, never paint her with a look like that. They paint her as if she never thought of self at all. Think of the words that came welling from her heart when she knew she was to be the mother of

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Messiah. In a single moment she was lifted up into pre-eminence and immortality. Yet the one thought that rises in her heart is not that she shall be worshipped or admired—"all generations," she says, "shall call me *blessed*." She did not want to be great or to be beautiful—she had no selfish ambitions of that kind. She did not want to have the praise of men, or to be the attraction of a million eyes. Mary's one passion was to be a blessing—Mary's one thought that filled her heart with song was that to weary men and burdened women the world would be different when Christ was born. A woman who could so forget herself was a woman of a singular humility. You will not find her often in the Gospels. She will do nothing to attract attention. For the truest humility is not humiliation, nor any abject disparagement of self. It is never to think about oneself at all.

That being so, we are prepared to learn that Mary was of a meditative nature. Luke tells us twice, as if to fix our thoughts upon it, that she kept things quiet in her heart. Once when the shepherds came with their amazing tidings of the chorus of angels in the sky at Bethlehem ; once when the Boy had been lost and then was found in eager converse with the Temple doctors, Luke tells us how Mary kept it in her heart—laid it up

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there as a secret thing—never breathed a word of it to anybody. Clearly a woman who had the gift of silence as truly as she had the gift of song ; a woman who knew that there are things you tarnish the moment you begin to speak of them ; a woman who set a guard upon her lips—felt that, without its secret, life was poor—recognized the indignity of gossiping. There are mothers who can talk of nothing but their children. Mary was not a mother of that kind. With the most wonderful child that ever woman nursed, she was silent about him, and held her peace in Nazareth. She dreamed her dreams, and had her own sweet thoughts, and prayed to God and had her cradle-music—and all the time she kept things in her heart. The beautiful thing is that as her son grew up, He showed so evidently His mother's influence. You talk of the power of speech our Saviour had—have you ever thought of His power of keeping silence ? And it seems to me that the reserve of Christ, which added to His authority so mightily, goes back, like His love of the flowers and of the birds, to the days of boyhood in the village home. There is many a son you will never understand unless you know something of his mother. Traits of his character—little compunctions—tendernesses—it is the mother who explains them all. And so in the perfect character

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of Christ are traits that you can never understand till you remember the motherhood of Mary. When I see Him standing before Pilate ; when I find Him refusing to say a single word ; when I think how often He was urged to speak and how often he refused to speak ; it is then this text comes back to me out of the happy days of home and childhood : “ Mary kept all these things within her heart.”

There is another glimpse we get of the Virgin-mother, and we get it in the song she sang. There is one feature of that song you note at once. It is not merely a welling-up of praise ; it is a song that is steeped in the Old Testament. The words are scarcely Mary's words at all ; they are from the treasury of psalmist and of prophet. “ My soul doth magnify the Lord ”—that long ago had been the cry of Hanna. “ He hath shewed strength with His arm ”—that is not Mary's, it is David's. And there are words of Job, in the *Magnificat*, and thoughts taken from the song of Moses, and golden utterances of Isaiah. That does not mean that Mary was a plagiarist. It does not mean that for that tumultuous hour she scanned the pages of psalmist and of prophet. It means that Mary had a heart so full of all that was written in the Word of God, that in that hour it came welling to her lips. Upon

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the Bible she had fed her heart. She had lived in the fellowship of all its noble teaching. In maiden meditation, fancy free, she had turned to the glorious heritage of Israel. In the quiet and unrecorded years of girlhood she had prayed and studied in the light of heaven, and now the witness of the years was in her speech. Is not that one mark of our great hours? Do they not reveal the life we have been living? Do they not show what we have loved or hated in the hidden days when there was none to see? And so in this great hour of Mary's life, when she is lifted into the gaze of all the world, the past that stands revealed to all the world is one of beautiful and earnest piety. No need to ask now where Our Lord was taught these ancient Scriptures that He loved so truly. With such a mother, whose heart and life were full of them, we can understand the secret now. That wonderful knowledge of prophet and of psalmist that was the sword of Jesus as it was His stay, began in the teaching at His mother's knee.

I close by asking you if you remember what is the last glimpse we get of Mary? It is one of the most beautiful touches in the Scriptures. It is not an appearance of the risen Christ to her, for we never read that He appeared to Mary. It is not a vision of her as the queen of heaven, for

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she is never mentioned in the Revelations. It is something far more womanly than that ; something far more human and more tender. After Jesus had ascended into glory we read of a little company who gathered in Jerusalem,—in the upper room, to pray. And that is the last glimpse we get of Mary—for the Apostle tells us *she* was there—and so in prayer she passed out of sight. Not reigning on any heavenly throne, not wielding any authority with Christ, not lifted up in any queenly dignity with the universe worshipping the Mother of God. But a woman—praying—like any other sinner, whose only hope of power and peace and glory lay in the work that ended on the Cross. It is with that last thought we think of Mary. It is thus that she, too, leads us to the Saviour. For all her wonderful ministry to Christ, we love her, and adore the hand that chose her. And then like her, in prayer, we turn to Him by Whom we live, in Whom we hope to die; Whose is the only Name given among men whereby we must be saved.

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